VIDEOGAME CULTURE

JUNE 2006 £4

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Heavenly?

What developing on PS3 is really like

REVOLUTION REDEFINED

Hands on with Nintendo's new hardware and Ubisoft's slasher FPS Red Steel

BUGGING OUT

Is game testing still the best way of getting started in the industry?

A STALK IN THE PARK

The tranquil heart of New York falls prey to a new Alone In The Dark

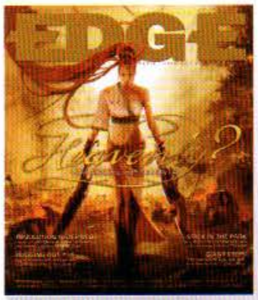
GIANT STEPS

The men behind Lego Star Wars on a new episode in game design

PREVIEWED OKAMI **SENSIBLE SOCCER** MERCENARIES 2 **LOST PLANET** MOTHER 3 **DEAD RISING** MOTOGP '06

REVIEWED KINGDOM HEARTS II **DREAMFALL** ROGUE TROOPER **RISE OF LEGENDS** URBAN CHAOS **LOST MAGIC**





For a developer, revealing a game to the press for the first time is often nerve-wracking. Years of private effort come together in one moment of revelation. And, for the first games of the new generation of hardware, there's extra pressure: these games, quite reasonably, are expected to be the best games ever seen. That's what we look for from a generational leap. And so, for their developers, there is an extra layer of stress.

And that's only the beginning. There's the stress of getting to grips with new, uncharted technology, the stress of working with unoptimised tools, the stress of new dev kits not working with old code. And that's before you get to worry that your competitors may have already leapfrogged your vision of the future; that the goalposts have been moved before they've even been made public. All of which, of course, is on top of the usual stresses of the always elaborate and often exhausting process of game making. In the weeks before E3, this pressure increases exponentially.

Yet sit down with the people behind these games and you can get a totally different impression. *Heavenly Sword*'s Tameem Antoniades is fuelled by conviction and confidence in what his team can produce. David Nadal and Nour Polloni, leading the team behind *Alone In The Dark: Near Death Investigation*, are invigorated by the opportunity to revolutionise the genre the series originally created. Josh Resnick, overseeing Pandemic's follow-up to *Mercenaries*, relishes the chance to live out childhood dreams of pyrotechnic excess. What is developing for PS3 really like? 'Exciting' seems to be the word they'd most likely agree on.

Nor is it only PS3 developers who are energised by new technology. Ubisoft's Paris studio, challenged by Nintendo's Revolution to think game design first and technology second, has created a new fusion of sword- and gunplay in *Red Steel*. And Jeff Minter, in his new regular column, explains how Xbox 360's Live Arcade means the best of gaming's heritage can become a cornerstone of its future. Exciting? Read on, and see for yourself.



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"She batted all them big eyes at you, and you fell for it – like an egg from a tall chicken."

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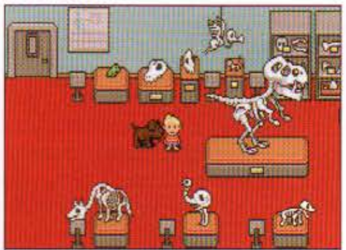


















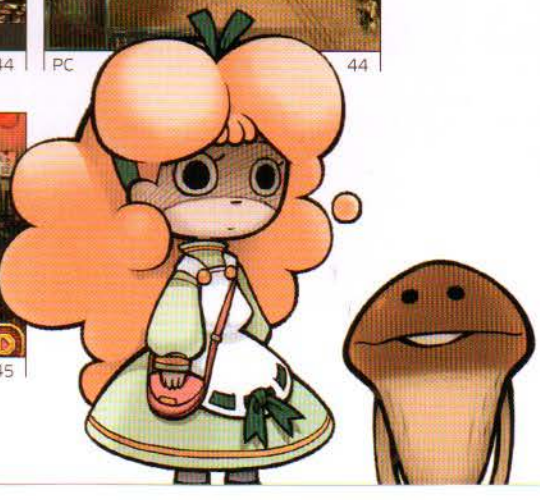












Review













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As this concept model shows, it's as hard to predict the physical form of next year's phones as it is to be confident that they'll truly become established as a gaming platform



HARDWARE

Mobile gaming on the move

There's entertainment, innovation, money, and variety in mobile games – and all at a bargain price. So why doesn't it feel like it?

Mobile gaming has arrived – sort of. With $2 billion worth of mobile games sold last year, and Screen Digest predicting that by 2010, worldwide revenues from downloaded mobile games will reach $7bn, the question is no longer whether anyone will pay to play games on the nascent platform. Rather, it's *who* will? Conventional gamers, after all, have traditionally shunned mobile, put off by terrible early experiences or the obtuseness of actually buying a game. Instead, the platform has created a new constituency.

"The casual mobile gamer is perhaps less visible, but that segment of the market is growing rapidly and numbers are surprisingly large," says **Simon Protheroe**, new media and IT director at Eidos. "In London, the average Underground carriage always has a couple of people playing mobile games." Nevertheless, 'casual' should not be confused with 'mass market'. Surveys repeatedly show games are downloaded by fewer than five per cent of phone owners in the west in any month: less than 10 per cent have downloaded one at all. Even in Korea, perhaps the most advanced mobile games market, monthly download rates are below eight per cent.

Even worse, Robert Tercek, the founder of GDC Mobile, warned at last month's gathering in San Jose that research suggests many who download games don't do so again. Growth curves – the trajectory of which so recently had a Dave Mirra-defying steepness to them – are flattening. Suddenly mobile gaming looks less like a growing new pastime and more like accidental by-product of new phone owners exploring their options.

With handsets and games rapidly improving and the money put into making and marketing



As Robert Tercek (above) has pointed out, despite the mobile platform's easy billing, it doesn't encourage anyone to buy games



This early prototype screenshot illustrate Nokia's plans for its N-Gage platform. Not due until 2007, this virtual service will offer many features familiar from the 360's online environment, but Nokia insists it has been inspired purely by the needs of mobile gamers

mobile entertainment still increasing, that's probably too negative a view. From simple gems like Glu's *Skipping Stone* and Digital Chocolate's *Tower Bloxx* to high-end handheld-like fare such as Square Enix's camera-based *Final Fantasy VII: Before Crisis* and EA's *Need for Speed Most Wanted*, the games are there, if you can find them. "Over the past two years, countless projects kicked off with an expensive venture capital-subsidised licence and over 50 per cent of the development budget allocated to handset porting on the back-end, rather than actual game development," explains **Thor Gunnarsson** of mobile developer Ideaworks3D. "The impact on game quality under these circumstances is predictable."

But anyone now looking for a transformative moment for mobile games missed it. In August last year, Electronic Arts bought the NASDAQ-listed mobile games publisher Jamdat for $684 million –

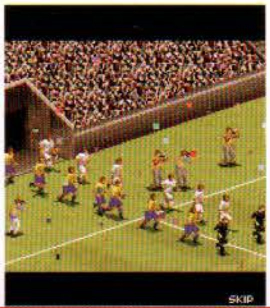
Illustration: Matthew Dartford













Four to play now

Games on the go – and no waiting required

SKIPPING STONE
Developer: GamEvil
Publisher: I-play

Winner of Best Game Made For Mobile at GSM in February, *Skipping Stone* brought the self-explanatory 'one-thumb gaming' concept to Europe.

ANCIENT EMPIRES II
Developer: Glu
Publisher: Glu

Anyone thinking *Advance Wars* cut down to size has essentially got the measure of *Ancient Empires II*. Turn-based strategy combat is backed by bright graphics and a compelling 'hot seat' multiplayer mode.

REAL FOOTBALL 2006
Developer: Gameloft
Publisher: Gameloft

On a high-end handset, *Real Football 2006* competes with football offerings on the DS, PSP and GBA. Only sometimes torturous control via the keypad – often the Achilles' heel of phones – lets it down. For more straightforward fare, try *Playman World Soccer*.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG PART 1
Developer: iFone
Publisher: iFone

On sufficiently mighty phones this is, in spirit at least, a near-perfect conversion of the Mega Drive's *Sonic The Hedgehog*. Again, only controlling the manic mammal on a typical handset presents an impediment to enjoyable gaming. Unusually on mobile, even the music's good.



five times EA's previous biggest deal. Jamdat accounted for 30 per cent of all mobile game revenues in the US and Europe. With Jamdat's casual titles (not least the perennial *Tetris*) allied to EA's existing brands, the new EA Mobile looks unstoppable, especially with head man **Mitch Lasky** doubling what Jamdat spent on games R&D last year, putting more money into game development than Jamdat earned as an independent in 2005. Lasky provocatively warned in a GDC keynote that it's already too late for anyone but Gameloft to catch EA/Jamdat.

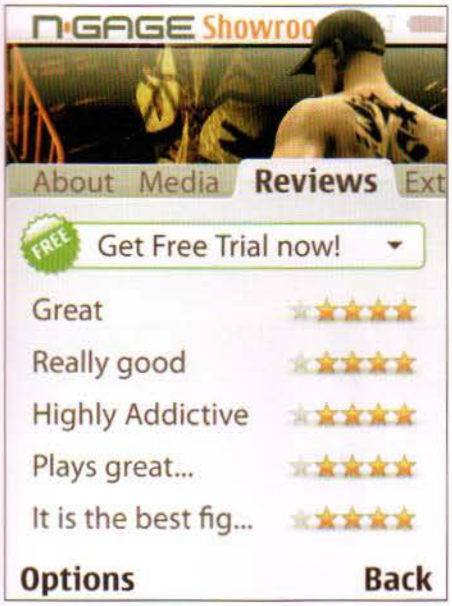
More important for gamers will be whether EA's strength can knock the sector into shape. In particular, Lasky has the pockets to talk back to the operators, and to call for better support for games on their portals. At GDC he illustrated his point by showing how in the past three years mobile games have been transformed from 2D to 3D, yet operator's portals still look like two-line entries in the classified ads.

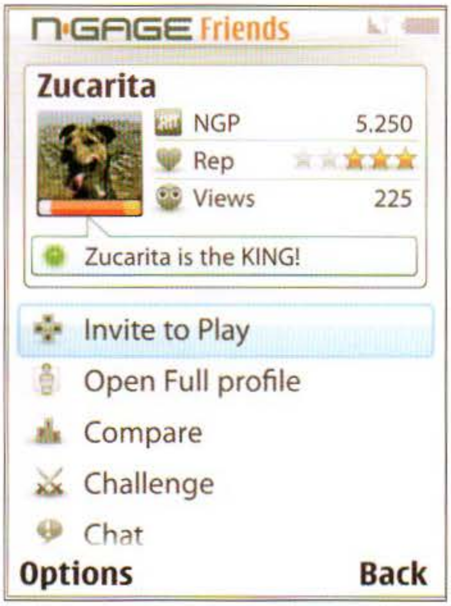
But the dominant force in phone gaming may not be a developer or publisher, but a platform holder. Nokia is another giant looking to shake things up, in its case with the next evolution of N-Gage. Anyone who scoffed at the original clunky N-Gage – and its terrible hold-to-the-head ergonomics – or even those underwhelmed by the superior N-Gage QD follow-up, might think a dodo-style fate more deserved. But that would miss the point – something Nokia can't be accused of. Realising N-Gage consumers appreciated the

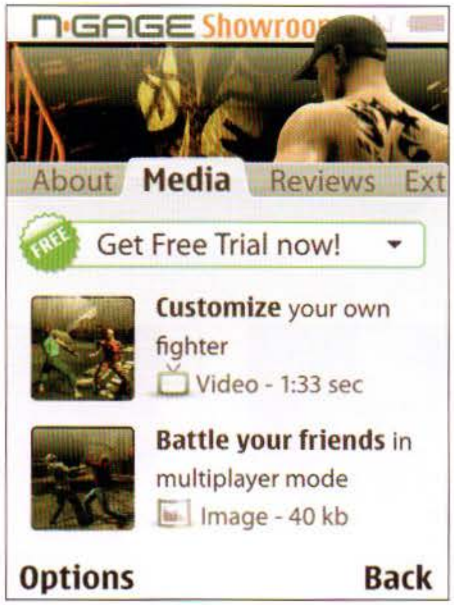




EA Mobile's Mitch Lasky (top) believes games are too hard to buy. Nokia's Simon Etchells (above) sees the new N-Gage as an answer







These prototype screens for the next-generation N-Gage platform show how Nokia aims to overcome the problems of existing mobile game retail offerings, by offering reviews and free demos, which can be rated by players and shared with their friends

format-holder approach it brought to mobile games, but also that mobile buyers wants choice and diversity when selecting a handset, Nokia is abandoning the dedicated games device approach it pioneered with N-Gage. For long after the press moved on, N-Gage's uninspiring launch library of titles was boosted by the likes of excellent multiplayer strategy game *Pathway To Glory*, and by Nokia's N-Gage Arena. The latter, a multiplayer matching and community service, is perhaps the most successful incarnation of connected phone gaming yet to appear in the west, and Nokia has learned the lesson.

"As we moved forward, the desire for connectivity became clear," explains **Simon Etchells**, Nokia's head of marketing for games. In tandem with Nokia's 'made for mobile' focus, N-Gage appealed to consumers otherwise confused by the opaqueness and inconsistency of the rest of the mobile market. Etchells believes mobile gaming has suffered from a lot of little problems added up. "People do play mobile games, pre-installed and embedded on their phones," he points out. "But outside of the N-Gage the market is still in its infancy, and downloaded games have not delivered the experience people thought they would."

> **"People do play mobile games, but outside of the N-Gage the market is still in its infancy, and downloaded games have not delivered the experience people thought they would"**

Due in 2007, the next-gen N-Gage platform is virtual: a software portal and management system accessed via the usual menus on Nokia's N-series smartphones. The easy reference point is that it will constitute the 360's online environment on your mobile, and there's some justice to that description. The aim is to provide what Etchells calls an "end-to-end experience" that makes mobile gaming hassle-free. Graphics-heavy and dedicated to gaming, the N-Gage platform should make it easy to browse games to buy, discover and download demos and trials, share scores with friends, and manage the games you've already bought.

Integration with the N-Gage Arena is enhanced, and now-familiar features such as a unique gamer identity and an inter-title scoring/ranking system will also be included.

One question is whether operators will consider the new N-Gage as a rival to their portals, and so bar it from being pre-installed. Etchells dismisses this, arguing it will help operators drive up data traffic and increase the average revenue per phone owner. "We will be working with operators to integrate N-Gage into their offerings" he says. "There may be pushback from one or two, but overall we're getting positive vibes."

Operators' portals currently provide mobile games publishers with the bulk of their sales, but few applaud them. Publishers complain that operators are making little effort to promote games – as Tercek has noted, in mobile the best billing mechanism in existence for impulse purchases is allied to the world's worst platform for merchandising. Considering how cheap downloadable games are – £3 to £5 – it seems astonishingly difficult to get consumers to try them, perhaps because most are offered games via portals that give a bare minimum of information.

Worse, even as the costs of developing mobile games rise with 3D and, in Europe at least, prices-per-download fall, mobile operators are said to be intent on docking publishers a higher share of revenue, or on charging for placement on their portals. Perhaps EA Mobile's Lasky alone is sufficiently strong to warn that: "Carriers will not grow their business by squeezing publishers – they will strangle the business."

But Lasky points the finger at rival publishers too, arguing there are far too many mobile games and "most of them suck", and suggesting operators implement a football league-style system to bring only the best games to the general shopper's attention. It's certainly true that mobile gaming makes conventional games look like a hotbed of experimentation and risk-taking. *Tetris* has topped ELSPA's monthly mobile download chart



Consequences

Mergers, acquisitions, VC money and even ennui has transformed the main mobile players in the past 18 months

USED TO BE	AND THEN	IS NOW
IOMO	was acquired	Infospace
Macrospace	was acquired	Sorrent
Sorrent	changed name to	Glu
Digital Bridges	changed name to	I-play
Kayak/Synergenix	merger and name change to	Blaze
Jamdat	was acquired	EA
iFone	merger	iFone/Glu
Mforma	changed name	Hands-on Mobilea











THOR GUNNARSSON

VP, business development, Ideaworks3D

Why don't dedicated gamers play mobile games?
Firstly, outside Japan and Korea, awareness of mobile games is relatively low. Second, developers and publishers need to strike a careful balance between re-treads of 8bit-era games with something that looks and plays like a modern game. The experience must be fresh and tailored to the medium.

How will things change?
The increasing popularity of native gaming platforms such as BREW and Symbian will drive a radical improvement in game quality. Consequently, we will see much heavier involvement from established developers and publishers.

Are off-portal sales or Nokia's reworking of N-Gage a viable alternative to operators' portals?
If Nokia is successful in delivering the simplicity and user experience of iTunes-style synching from the desktop to the phone, it could become a very compelling consumer channel.

What are you doing to improve matters?
Our current collaboration with Square-Enix promises to bring a level of quality and attention to innovative gameplay that we feel will convince gamers to take a closer look at mobile.

Will mobile gaming always be a separate market?
The boundaries will become very blurred over the next two years. At the point we start playing games on phones that match the PSP's graphics, while making phone calls from next gen PSPs and Nintendo DSs, can we still draw a line between the markets?

Recommends:
Final Fantasy VII: Before Crisis (Square-Enix), *Need for Speed Most Wanted* (EA), *The Sims 2 Mobile* (EA)

SIMON PROTHEROE

New media and IT director, Eidos

Why don't dedicated gamers play mobile games?
Until recently mobile games haven't held great appeal for these players, although that's changing.

How?
We are seeing devices emerge with hardware 3D acceleration, and input mechanics better suited to game control. As ever, game developers will squeeze every last drop of performance to create ever more compelling content. The business model is also evolving, with new routes to market.

Are there viable alternatives to mobile operators?
It's quite a way off, but yes, we believe direct to consumer models will emerge that make sense. In some territories, Spain for example, this is already a viable model. In the UK, it'll be interesting to see how the traditional operator portal will change to reflect the arrival of i-mode and similar initiatives.

What are you doing to improve matters?
Eidos is bringing our core brands to the mobile market in parallel with releases on console and PC platforms. The releases of *Championship Manager 2006* and *Tomb Raider: Legend* are probably the first time that's been visible to consumers, but it'll get stronger.

Will mobile remain a separate market?
The more casual market will remain relatively independent – although connected, community-based games will be key to future growth. On the console side, we'll see more convergence, particularly as next gen consoles feature connected gameplay more prominently. I dream of an online *Championship Manager* where players interact using whatever device is most suitable at that moment.

Recommends:
The *Need For Speed* series (EA), the upcoming 3D version of *Tomb Raider: Legend* (Eidos)

PAUL MUNFORD

Business development director, Player X, and publisher of Monty's Gaming And Wireless Outlook

Why don't dedicated gamers play mobile games?
Last year, operators spent all their money acquiring games content instead of marketing it. That's why only five per cent of mobile phone owners download games – they don't know it's possible.

What will change things?
3D is making an impact, with games approaching PSP quality, especially on the V Cast channel on Verizon in the US. Also, multiplayer is increasingly important to publishers, and is the future of mobile gaming.

Is off-portal a viable alternative?
Off-portal is the way forward as direct-to-consumer models evolve. Proper marketing, such as including short code numbers on retail boxes and in movies and TV shows is a natural evolution. Expect the Jamsters of today to be replicated everywhere.

What else is changing?
Publishers paying operators for deck placement is becoming more prevalent – the days where publishers could get their games published because they schmoozed their mates are over. Whether this will be profitable remains to be seen, but everybody's revenues will go up.

Will mobile gaming always be a separate market?
Definitely. Mobile games cost about a fiver to download and will probably become cheaper as subscription models gain ground. But mobile games could be a very good marketing tool for more expensive console ones.

Recommends:
Diner Dash (Glu), *Ratchet & Clank* (Sony), *Skipping Stone* (Glu).

MATT SPALL

CEO, Morpheme

Why don't dedicated gamers play mobile games?
Maybe for a number of reasons. You can't even approximate the kind of experience you can get on a current console or handheld platform – if you approach a mobile phone expecting it to give you something like *Shadow Of The Colossus* or *Black*, you're kidding yourself. Where a phone can approximate that kind of gameplay (something like the N-series devices from Nokia) the control mechanism still sucks and the screen is too small. Also, the underlying system in most phones dedicated to games is still very much given a back seat.

What is changing?
Publishers are looking more closely at the audience that can be sold to on mobile. Sure there's an amount of crossover between mainstream console gaming and mobile, but everyone has a mobile phone and not everyone has a console.

Are off-portal sales viable?
I think there will be off-portal sales (see Jamba's success in Germany), but realistically I can't see anyone wrestling the primary point of sale away from the operator. There's a level of trust that exists between the operator and its customer that it's unlikely a third party will replicate.

What are you doing to improve matters?
We've launched a casual gaming portal at www.offthewrist.com where we're going to release free online and 'try before you buy' downloadable games; it's a lot easier to download or play a game online for free than to take a risk on a mobile game, where your only real indicator is a title, a screenshot and sometimes a few lines of text.

Will mobile always be separate from console gaming?
Yes, there'll always be a gap between the two, primarily because of the different types of market.

Recommends:
Bejewelled (Jamdat), *Slyder* (I-play), *Pub Pool* (Infospace), *FIFA Soccer* (EA), *Monopoly* (iFone), *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* (Glu).





for a year, and elsewhere movie and proven game licences predominate, as publishers strive to grab the attention of consumers in a market where a name is often all a would-be purchaser has to guide them. For all the bullishness that made 2005 a year of multi-million-dollar mergers and acquisitions among mobile games outfits, in terms of software it was, as Tercek noted at GDC Mobile, the year of safe bets.

Even when you decide to buy a particular game, disappointment can still arise due to the industry's evergreen problem – fragmentation. There are hundreds of phones, with innumerable combinations of processing power, screen specifications and control methods – and therefore a huge variation in how games perform.

A high-end phone like Sony Ericsson's W550i Walkman phone, with its excellent landscape gaming mode, needs games to be created or at least ported with its layout in mind, while at the other end of the scale, owners of cheaper phones soon discover the 3D sports game they saw on a friend's brand new device may look and even play completely differently on their own. It all makes mobile an even more onerous market to tackle: EA expects to release an incredible 58,000 mobile SKUs during 2006.

The situation is getting better – J2ME and BREW have eased the difficulties for developers – and the hope is that emerging giants like EA Mobile and Gameloft can agree some standards. "Over the next 12 months, we expect to see concrete results from standards efforts, such as Khronos' OpenKODE initiative for native gaming," adds Gunnarsson. "By delivering a cross-platform API for code portability, OpenKODE will reduce handset and platform fragmentation."

But fragmentation will never totally disappear in a market where better hardware arrives every week – imagine a console format war every month. Going forward, mobile gaming is very likely to take a step back for every two steps forward. Each move that brings some benefit – i-mode, for instance, finally launched last year in the UK by 02, or the spread of 3G – means more education for weary consumers, not to mention overcoming the suspicion generated by the recent subscription controversy, which saw purchasers who understood they were buying a single download unwittingly signed up to weekly billing.

Movie and proven game licences predominate, as publishers strive to grab the attention of consumers in a market where a name is often all a would-be purchaser has to guide them

Yet mobile games also offer the promise of what many complain is missing from the mainstream – cheap games, passionate start-ups, and, in the best cases, back-to-basics gameplay. And then there's the strongest argument for the format – that everyone has a phone with them, at all times. The idea of an always-connected, always-in-your-pocket gaming platform remains as potent as ever, but no matter how many strides forward the mobile industry takes, there always seems to be more ground for it to cover.



Newswire

EA payouts continue

In the third such turn of events for the publisher in recent months, EA has paid a total of $14.9 million to its software engineers following a class-action lawsuit over unpaid overtime. The terms of the settlement, which affects programmers employed between February 14 2001 and February 14 2006, require many of the entry-level programmers to be reclassified as hourly workers, becoming eligible for overtime pay. A similar suit filed by graphic artists last October netted them $15.6 million, and major deadlines for EA projects were consequently moved from Mondays to Fridays to encourage a standard five-day working week.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

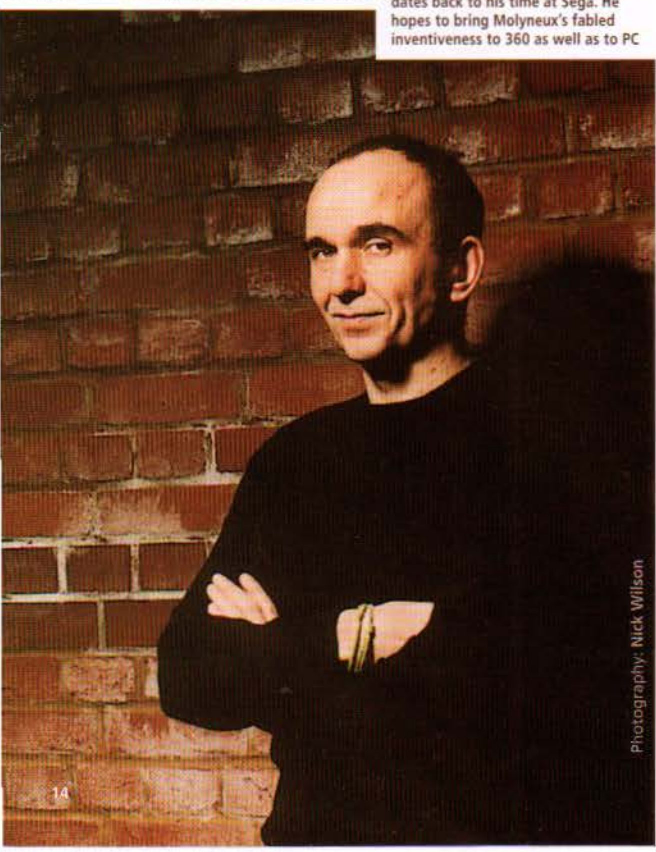
Finally providing a dedicated space to thrash out years of urban legend, lore and speculation on who did what first, Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center has established the Game Innovation Database to settle the score.

Broken down into game mechanics, software and computational innovations, interface, general aesthetics, story, genre and business development, each innovation gets its own page to chart its first use and the influence it's had on the industry.

Just two months into its life it already covers an impressive range of topics and games: the Konami Code, bullet time, survival horror, downloadable content. There's still room for growth, though, and a few niggling details we're itching to set straight, but thankfully, as a wiki, it's entirely open to the gaming community at large to add or modify entries. So the next time you're about to come to blows over which fighting game had the first customisable character wardrobe, or offered six degrees of freedom in a tactical strategy game, you'll know where to turn.

Site:
The Game Innovation Database
URL:
http://www.gameinnovation.org





Peter Moore (above) has a relationship with Peter Molyneux (below) which dates back to his time at Sega. He hopes to bring Molyneux's fabled inventiveness to 360 as well as to PC

Photography: Nick Wilson

INTERVIEW

A roaring trade

Peter Moore talks us through Microsoft's decision to add Lionhead to its pride

What are the specifics of the deal?
Lionhead is going to become a part of Microsoft Game Studios as a wholly owned firstparty developer. We absolutely couldn't be more excited to have Peter Molyneux and his very talented staff there in Guildford as part of our team, and the acquisition of the intellectual property that comes along with that, games such as *Fable*, *Black & White* and *The Movies*, for example… This will be something we'll be able to elaborate further on at E3, but we're obviously delighted that we're able to add Lionhead to Rare up in Twycross and a lot of the work we've been doing with Bizarre Creations in Liverpool and of course Real Time Worlds up in Dundee. So we're becoming the British Empire [laughs].

Are you going to leave any developers in the UK for anyone else to buy?
I don't know who else is there! Anyway, we don't have that much money here at Microsoft so it'd have to be a really good deal.

It's been said that one of the reasons Molyneux left Bullfrog was that he felt that he was being squeezed creatively by EA. How is it going to be different with Lionhead and Microsoft?
One of the things we take pride in is, when we do acquire a company – and we talked about Rare but we can also talk about Bungie – we recognise that while we can come in and provide the financial resources and a secure corporate environment, so people don't have to worry about making the rent next month or hitting payroll, we also stand back and allow them to be creative. It's no good us coming in and forcing, for example, milestones that don't work, that don't allow creativity. As a firstparty, there's less pressure. I'm not saying by any stretch of the imagination that EA works this way, but the pressure on hitting deadlines for multiple-platform games is higher if you're coming in as a thirdparty publisher. If you really look at what we need to do as a firstparty – to develop great games and manage a portfolio and not be pressured by hitting the next quarter – you can see how we're focused differently. The team at Lionhead are going to be expected to deliver, but we have to give them enough oxygen to be creative and work with them to support them, not work with them to suppress them.

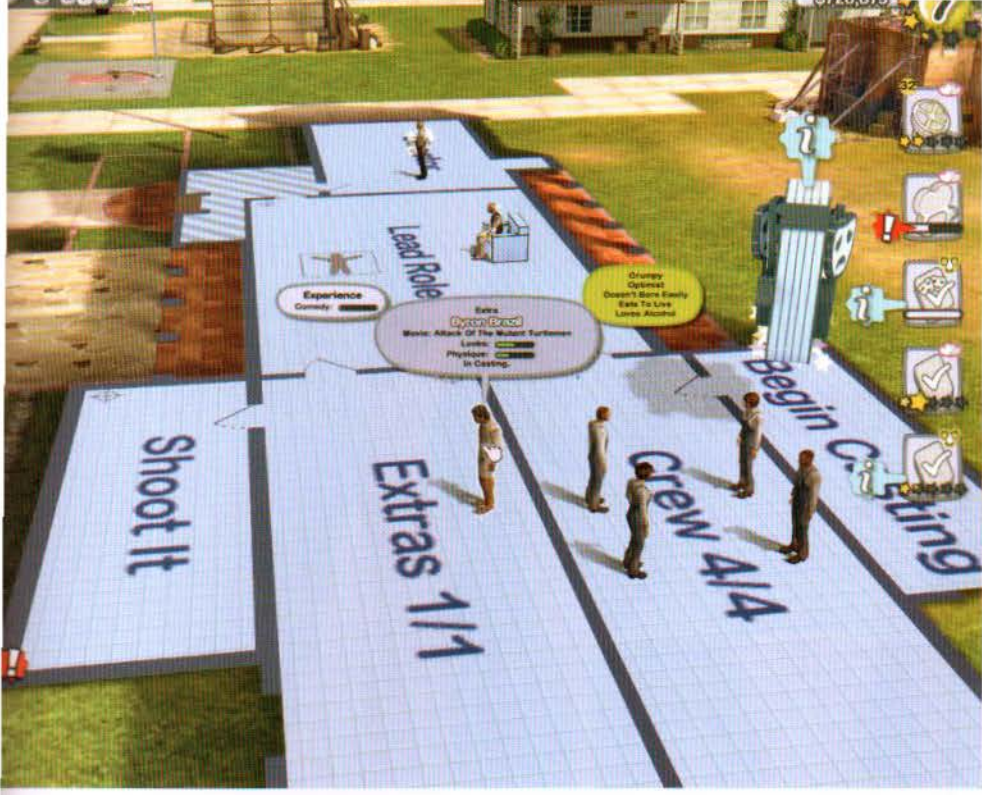
Does this mean that Lionhead is going to become console-only?
It will be one console, obviously, but also PC. One of the great attractions for us is that Peter cut his teeth on the PC and still does tremendous work for it. We see ourselves very much as a two-platform company, and looking into the future, taking other platforms – mobile phones, things of that nature – into account, what we do see is Peter being a great support to the Microsoft games platform, whether that's a console or games for Windows. And he's so excited about what we've shown so far on Vista, and the power that brings, and the ability to work with DirectX 10, and so on.

There is evidence to suggest that developers are better placed to get more from a platform if they're wholly dedicated to it, so why not get Lionhead to drop Windows and focus instead on Xbox 360?





Black & White's second installment (left) demonstrated how much resonance Lionhead's back catalogue still has, and *Fable* (right) broke sales records in the US and Europe, a rare accomplishment for original IP. Microsoft will be banking on similar achievements in the future







The Movies, for PC only, was high on innovation, but shorter on sales than Lionhead hoped. Could more closely integrated support from Microsoft have changed its fortunes?

[Laughs] Clearly you're talking to Microsoft here and saying: "Drop the PC" – and I'm not sure we can have that conversation. No, one of the things you'll see at E3 is a real commitment to Vista in being able to reinvigorate the PC world. We're all excited about consoles, but there are specific things you can do with PCs, and there are still tens of millions of people who love to play games with a keyboard and mouse. Really, it's not only about what we're going to be doing on those two separate platforms but, perhaps most importantly, the plans we have to allow those platforms to collaborate with each other, to be able to grow the installed base of gamers and broaden the demographic. There is a bunch of people who are very, very happy navigating things with a PC keyboard and mouse, who are a little intimidated by a videogame controller nowadays, and it's our goal to maybe bridge the gap between the two. And I can't think of a better guy to help us do it than Peter Molyneux.

If you look at Lionhead's recent output, sales of *The Movies* have been disappointing. Will you be encouraging the team to continue to make more experimental games like that, or will there be an awareness of the need for more 'gamey' games?

I think that you can't suppress Peter's real desire – he's a really deep thinker who simply isn't going to take a cookie-cutter approach to making games. This is the guy who pretty much invented the god game genre. I always say that the role of the firstparty is to push the edges and do things that are a little dangerous – so, do we need them to be massive commercial successes? Well, you'd like them to be, but do you need to attract people to your platform with game experiences that they can't get anywhere else? Absolutely. I don't need a developer who can churn out another action-adventure game, I don't need a developer that can churn out another driving game – I mean, I've got *Project Gotham* and *Forza* as IP that have been successful for us – so from that point of view what I do need is somebody that can really, really make me feel uncomfortable when he sits down and says: "Here's my idea". And believe me I've sat in enough meetings and gone to dinner enough with Molyneux where he's had those wacky ideas, and I love him for it. These are the people who make a difference in our industry – look at Miyamoto or Will Wright. Fortunately for both of those guys they've ultimately had commercial successes, but more importantly they change the way we think about games. And games have to evolve.

"We're all excited about consoles, but there are specific things you can do with PCs, and there are still tens of millions who love to play games with a keyboard"

How much will you be encouraging Lionhead to explore online functionality with its Xbox 360 projects?

Very much. Peter has some great ideas for how we can utilise online, so there'll be encouragement, but one of the things that's important is we're not going to try and force-fit online elements into games and genres just for the sake of it. But I think you'll see that Peter, like every other developer in the world now, realises that online has to be an important part of the game experience – whether it's just by simply creating a community, or having the ability to play in tournaments, or by building in multiplayer mechanics.

And then he'll have to deal with his own horse armour dilemmas...

Oh, yeah [laughs]. Well, you know what, at the rate that *Oblivion* has been selling, I'm not sure how big a problem that is. But that game has been on fire, all around the world, and I'll take those problems any time.

Newswire



Onedotzero becomes ten

Having grown to represent a film festival, studio and DVD label since inception in 1996, onedotzero has become known as one of the world's most visionary media organisations. Its festival event is this year taking place from June 2-11 at the London ICA, one of the proposed highlights being a session entitled Overplay, described as 'an exploration of the future of gaming through emergent forms of gameplay, and direct interventions into the physical and urban environment.' Further details can be found at: www.onedotzero.com

Update: Edge's Top 100

Edge's Top 100 Games special edition is in the process of being rescheduled, which means that it will appear at a later date. Watch these pages for updates in the future.



Microsoft reinforces its eastern front

Can new commitments from Japanese studios reinvigorate Xbox 360's fortunes?

Light on figures but long on determination, Microsoft used its recent Xbox Business Briefing in Tokyo to reiterate that success for the 360 means success in Japan as well as in the US and Europe. With a new general manager of the Xbox Division in Japan (**Takashi Sensui**, replacing Yoshihiro Maruyama who was removed soon after the machine's original underwhelming launch), and a raft of fresh projects more closely tailored to a Japanese market, Microsoft seems eager to make up for the failure of a launch heavy with unappealing western titles.

Online, Microsoft is dedicated to cracking Japan. Live Arcade has the most support, with Konami, Hudson, SNK Playmore, Yukes, D3 Publishing and Bandai Namco already signed up

Central to Xbox 360's new strategy are links with established Japanese companies and recognised IP. Much of the briefing was given over to the vice president of recently merged Bandai Namco Games, Shin Unozawa, who announced a surprisingly strong commitment to Microsoft's machine. In answer to the desperate lack of a Japanese killer app, Namco's most important 360 offering is undoubtedly its new Gundam title, previously confirmed at the original announcement of the console in Japan, but now revealed in greater detail. Rather than expanding on recent PS2 titles, the game, tentatively named *Gundam Online*, seems closer to Digital Illusions' *Battlefield* series, offering vast arenas in which Federation and Zion troops fight both on foot and piloting Mobile Suits. Another mech-themed offering, *Zegapain XOR*, clearly intends to recreate the multimedia success of the Bandai's *.hack* titles. Alongside the 360 game there will be cross-media support with anime and manga series. Both titles suggest that Microsoft is targeting the hardcore in order to expand its 360 market: *Zegapain* is pitched at dedicated anime consumers, and Gundam has a notoriously dedicated fan base already in existence. Whether they will respond to a western-style FPS on a western machine remains to be seen, but early responses seem encouraging.

Bandai Namco also announced *Culdcept Saga*, a boardgame title with card-battling elements. Previous instalments were released on the Sega Saturn and the PlayStation, and this familiarity, combined with the promise of Live support, meant the audience reaction was very positive. Next, Hironobu Sakaguchi took to the stage to show new videos of *Lost Odyssey* and *Blue Dragon*. With no new in-game footage to show, his presentation was brief. Nevertheless, he revealed that *Blue Dragon* should be released this year while *Lost Odyssey* will come out in 2007.

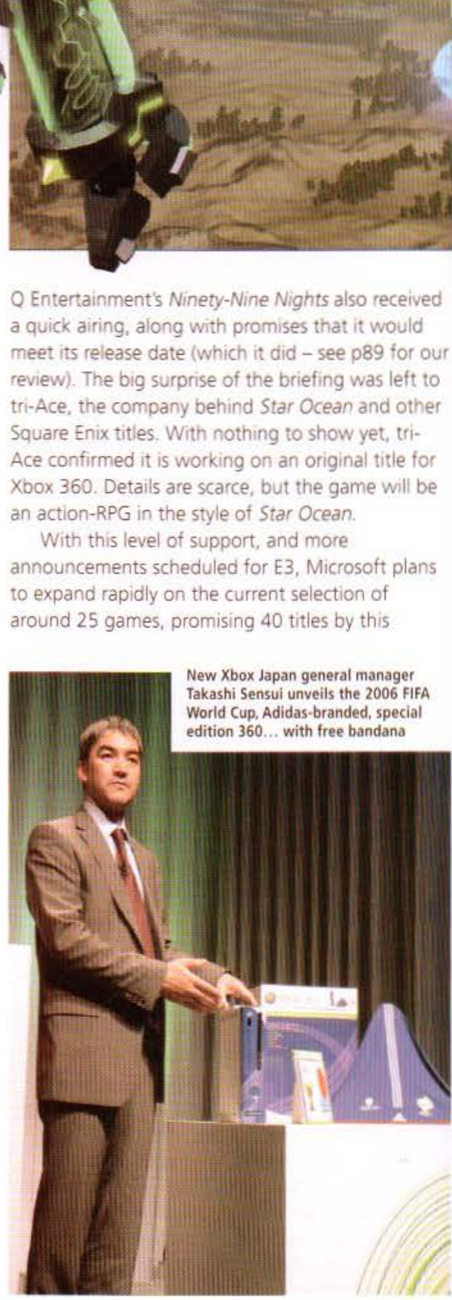
Square Enix was present too, not to talk about *Final Fantasy XI*, but in order to introduce a sequel to *Silpheed*, renamed *Project Silphy*. Q Entertainment's *Ninety-Nine Nights* also received a quick airing, along with promises that it would meet its release date (which it did – see p89 for our review). The big surprise of the briefing was left to tri-Ace, the company behind *Star Ocean* and other Square Enix titles. With nothing to show yet, tri-Ace confirmed it is working on an original title for Xbox 360. Details are scarce, but the game will be an action-RPG in the style of *Star Ocean*.

With this level of support, and more announcements scheduled for E3, Microsoft plans to expand rapidly on the current selection of around 25 games, promising 40 titles by this





There seems little doubt that the Live Arcade versions of Bandai Namco's *Galaga* and *Pac-Man* will prove a hit among the 360 audience worldwide



New Xbox Japan general manager Takashi Sensui unveils the 2006 FIFA World Cup, Adidas-branded, special edition 360... with free bandana



Gundam Online (far left) is definitely the right brand, but will it be the right game? Zegapain XOR (left) is perhaps a safer bet, especially since it promises to be spectacular. Anime downloads, such as Karas: The Prophecy (below), should also prove popular





summer and 80 by the end of the fiscal year. While 'applications' such as Aquazone, a fish-tank simulator, seem unlikely to provide Xbox 360 with the key it needs to open up the eastern market, and many other offerings fail to take advantage of the machine's power, this increase in number, and more importantly, range of titles will undoubtedly generate more interest.

Online, Microsoft is equally dedicated to cracking Japan. Perfectly suited to capitalise on the current trend for retro titles and minigames, Xbox Live Arcade has the most support, with Konami, Hudson, SNK Playmore, Yukes, D3 Publisher and Bandai Namco already signed up, and further companies saving their announcements for E3. Once again, details are scarce, but it seems likely that back catalogues will be vigorously raided. Bandai Namco revealed demo versions of *Pac-Man* and *Galaga*, and announced plans for worldwide tournaments. Alongside games, the Xbox Live Marketplace service will also work as a content delivery platform, starting with animation trailers. The first episode of the two-part anime series Karas: The Prophecy, by Tatsunoko Productions, is already available for download.



Despite Sensui's assertion that Microsoft is "prepared to do everything that's needed to make Xbox 360 a success", there is no dodging the fact that early Japanese uptake has been even slower than expected. However, there is some hope that the current atmosphere within the Japanese industry may come to Xbox 360's rescue. With PS3 delayed, companies such as Square Enix, while holding back their big franchises, are eager to maintain a presence on Microsoft's console, both as a source of revenue until Sony's new market is properly established, and as another potential gateway to the now vital western market. And so the irony is that although the 360's launch has been – almost unbelievably – less successful than the original Xbox's, the market conditions within Japan are much more conducive to producing strong commitments from Japanese studios. And that shift may yet prove crucial, as success for 360 in the east will depend both on Microsoft's ability to talk to the Japanese consumer, and on the games it has to talk about.



Mistwalker's Hironobu Sakaguchi gave a brief presentation, but there's no question that his two games, *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey*, present Microsoft's best chance of converting Japan

INTERVIEW



Electronic boogaloo

The man who sold middleware to gaming now has a more leftfield pitch: keeping console hip-hop real



"Pre-production should be longer and production shorter," says Lee. "With an efficient process you shouldn't need many more bums on seats to make a next-generation title"

During a five-year tenure as Criterion's vice president, **Chris Lee** (left) increased the proliferation of RenderWare from two to 25 per cent of all console games in development, signing brands such as *GTA*, the *Tony Hawk's* series and *Call Of Duty*. As commercial director of indie studio FreeStyle Games, he's not only hoping to bring hip-hop back to reality with breakdance sim *B-Boy*, but is doing so with an optimistic outlook for the industry's future.

Over the last year there's been some anxiety in the industry about managing the shift to next-gen. Was that fear justified?

There's always a panic when we're presented with what's defined as next-generation. It happened when we moved from PlayStation to PS2, and last year it happened again. The suggested solution is always to get in more people, and fundamentally the management here at FreeStyle don't believe that's required. It's actually about efficient process and production management. Obviously, we'll need to focus on content creation, but it's actually the content creation pipeline itself that's essential, not necessarily the grunt and the factory of creating more and more.

Some now suggest that the opportunities for developers are greater than they've ever been.

I'd agree that the opportunities for *good* developers are better than before. We're not worried, and think it's a wonderful time to be an independent in the industry.

Are creative options going to become more limited with convergence upon middleware such as Unreal Engine 3?

We certainly never believed that RenderWare would bring in creative restrictions, but that was a more genre-agnostic solution than something like UE, which is a solid solution for third- and firstperson shooters, but more of a challenge if you're doing sports products. The way in which people will approach tools and middleware is probably slightly different for next-gen. FreeStyle, for instance, will be looking at unique partners that can solve core problems, whether that's physics, animations or facial technology, and we'll be pulling in technology from a variety of different spaces. The idea of a one-stop shop is no longer applicable.

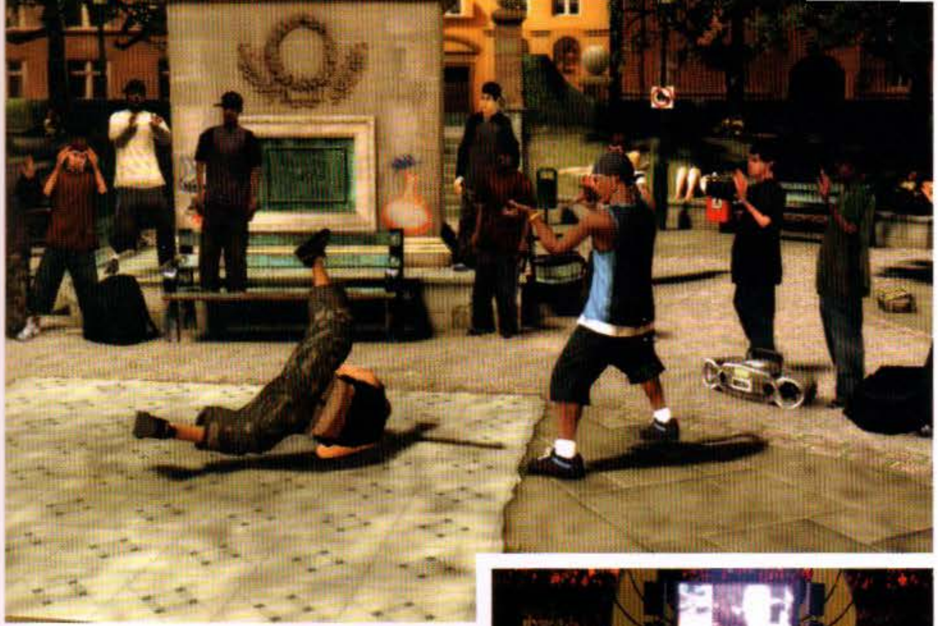
Do you see an opening in the marketplace for companies dealing exclusively in generic content – furniture, for example?

Possibly. My personal background is in visual simulation and virtual reality, where I've seen that done before. I'm not sure that many games companies would be interested in just buying stock items off the shelf, however.

The difficulty that a lot of studios find with outsourcing is that you need an incredibly intimate relationship with your outsourcing partners; otherwise it becomes such a draining, iterative process to re-communicate your goal.

What was they key to achieving such widespread sales of RenderWare?

We evangelised the idea in the industry that







"It was interesting and challenging actually animating these phenomenal breakdancers," reveals Lee. "Also, to tap into a culture that's not only very relevant but is also cross-demographic and cross-age-range – this will be a 3+ product. We were quite surprised that it hadn't been done before"

OUT THERE



MY GENERATIONS

Two new developments from the New Face Of Nintendo department come our way this month. First, the thirdparty series of wild-style GBA games once known as Digitylish (and likely Digiluxe in the west) have been rebranded as 'bit Generations' and comprise a new boutique demo display at Shibuya Parco. Though still unplayable, the series has allegedly culled support from such notables as analogue and beat soundsmith Cornelius.

Nintendo is also making available the winning student entries from its game seminar program as limited two-week-only DS downloads from wifi stations across Japan. The four entries run a wide gamut from isometric psychokinetic object-tossing shooter *Nekosogi Tornado*, triangular puzzler *Kurukeshi*, a storybook adventure starring twin pancake-making rats and, perhaps most interestingly, a paper-textured sketch-microbe simulator called *Bioum*.

www.nintendo.co.jp/n10/bitGenerations/index.html



we're an entertainment business, and that the core libraries aren't where your value is. Fundamentally, I think everyone understands that we shouldn't be reinventing the wheel, whether that means having proprietary technology or simply buying it in. Even going into next-gen, I'm seeing more and more studios iterate their current technology rather than starting from scratch. We're also very keen to push the message of content being king, and beyond that is the message that design is king. You need to have a recognisable and common platform that's up and running very quickly, to make sure that designers, programmers and content creators can get involved.

What inspired you to leave that and develop a game like *B-Boy*?

At FreeStyle, we were very interested in the urban sports action genre. We also felt that hip-hop hadn't been accurately represented within games or the media in general. When people talk about hip-hop, there are essentially four pillars: MC, DJ, graffiti and finally breakdancing. Everything has been represented quite negatively, with violence, bad language and so on, but *B-Boy* is more about the true origins of hip-hop, about expression and competition.

Little is known about the game's design, and few would immediately associate its subject matter with innovation. What makes it different?

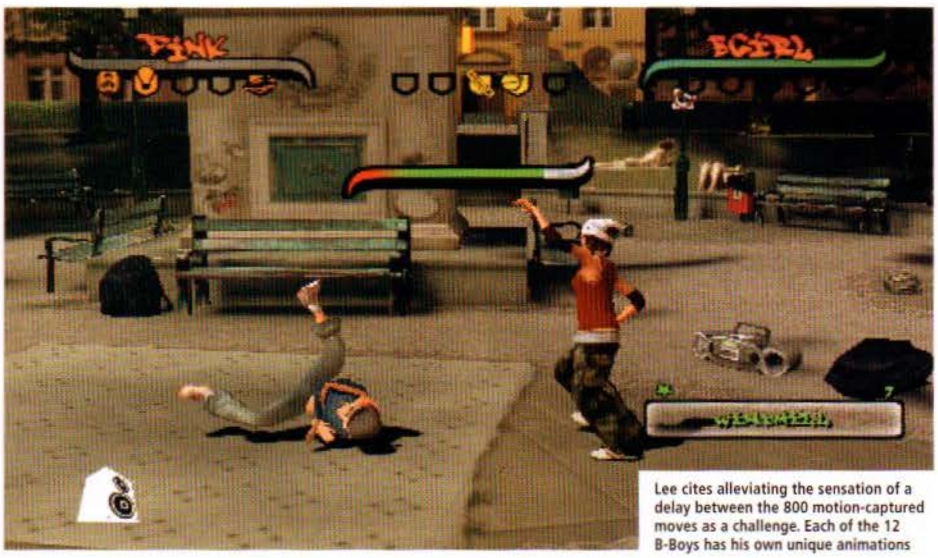
There's been some immediate concern that it's a *DDR* product. But it couldn't be further away from that. It's a combo-based PSP and PS2 product, with PSP wifi multiplayer.

The best way to describe the control system is combo-based with associated skills tests. So you're performing your individual moves and the transitions from one to the next, on the beats and with as much momentum as possible.

"The opportunities for good developers are better than before. It's a wonderful time to be an independent in the industry"

Do you worry about its niche appeal?

I think we've tackled that problem with the game mechanic: think *Tony Hawk's* or *SSX Tricky*. The way in which we've positioned the product is that it's almost *Tekken* goes breakdancing, but with a recognisable yet innovative control scheme. It's actually surprising: as we've got more and more into the scene and have worked with lots of hip-hop stars, we've realised how deep breakdancing goes into normal culture. It's an opportunity to break it to a massmarket audience.



Lee cites alleviating the sensation of a delay between the 800 motion-captured moves as a challenge. Each of the 12 B-Boys has his own unique animations

SOUND BYTES

"It's awful. Sales are near zilch. It's another Sony bomb – like Blu-ray."
A **high-ranking Universal exec** talks turkey to Reuters about the success UMD movies currently enjoy

"I've met [Nolan Bushnell] only once. We were supposed to meet on several occasions, once to have a face-to-face play-off in *Pong*, but he never showed up."
Gamasutra catches up with Odyssey inventor **Ralph Baer** to find that bygones aren't quite bygones

"The problem is that when we show it, people are going to be like, 'Yeah, whatever.' Honestly, at this point we just want to finish it."
3D Realms' **George Broussard** admits grimly determined defeat on *Duke Nukem Forever*

"I wanted to be your friend, your confidant, your companion. I wanted us to grow together, but now you've become the homebody you never wanted to be, and I continue my vagrant lifestyle, checking in on you occasionally and wondering if this is what Abraham Lincoln felt like. It cannot remain this way forever. Perhaps I will buy you a kitchen set. Or a living room."
Shawn Rider vents, via GamesFirst!, his love for his glitch-created *Oblivion* wife



INTERVIEW

From left to right: Pearson, the youthful Plumb and, seated because of his towering height, Boiston

Team players

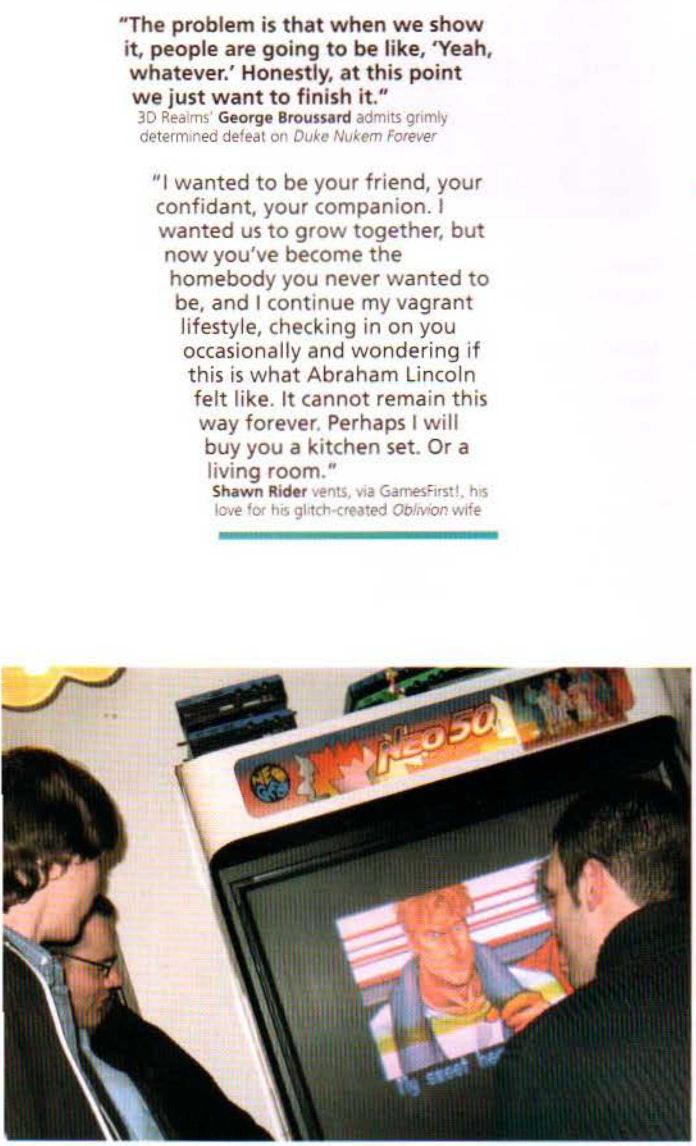
With PGR's global tournament gearing up, we speak to the supreme Live racing clan about the future of virtual motorsport

In April, Microsoft took its interest in the competitive gaming community – embodied by the scoreboards and spectator modes of Live on 360, plus some blue-sky musings from J Allard about webcam-enabled, broadcast tournaments – to the next level. It announced its sponsorship of the yearly World Cyber Games event, making Windows and Xbox 360 the exclusive platforms for the world's biggest gaming competition. It also kicked off a global *PGR3* tournament (watchable on Gotham TV) that will run through national qualifying rounds in May, and hold its international final at the Lamborghini factory in Italy on June 13. Ahead of the opening rounds, we spoke to members of the top online racing clan, Team Technique Racing – whose TTR initials will be likely be familiar from the highest ranks of the *PGR* and *Forza* timesheets – about pro gaming's first faltering steps onto consoles.

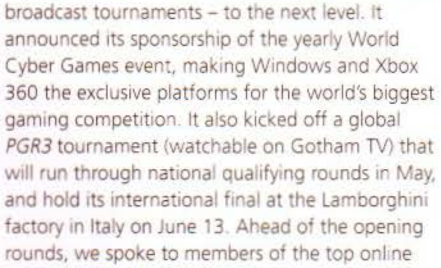
Team Technique – a clan which may someday expand into other genres, but for now focuses purely on racing – began in 2004 with a conversation between 36-year-old IT technician **Roger Pearson** ("probably the worst driver on the team") and two friends during a race on *PGR2*'s Nurburgring. But it was *Forza Motorsport*'s car club option that solidified the idea, and TTR set about a serious recruitment campaign of top players which culminated in all seven finalists in the UK *Forza* championships, including the eventual winner, 17-year-old **Adam Plumb**, being members. Its ranks have now swelled to 100, including real-world rally drivers and racing instructors, as well as online heroes like McLaren F1, the 14-year-old Swedish time-trial prodigy.

"My initial vision was to get to a professional level where the team and its members are paid for by sponsorship deals," says Pearson. "I do see that happening, but maybe a little way down the road." In the meantime, **Alan Boiston** – 28-year-old videogame retail professional, former cable TV games show presenter, *Ridge Racer* and *Geometry Wars* obsessive and TTR's marketing brain – is touting TTR to publishers as an elite testing unit. "One publisher has already said yes to working with us on a PS3 product," he says. "Having worked in the testing arena myself, I believe they could do more work in a day than a testing team could do in three weeks."

But the pro gaming scene, increasingly well established on PC, faces a difficult transition to consoles, not least because the natural sponsors – manufacturers of graphics cards and other gaming equipment – have little or no market there. And, as TTR discovered at the Forza UK Challenge, the professional standards needed to run and take part in serious competition are far from being implemented at slapdash, marketing-focused console events.







Xbox 360 is an unsurprising hit with TTR, catering as to their old-school arcade tastes with the likes of *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* as well as to their thirst for top-class racers like PGR3





TTR doesn't feel spectator modes make satisfying viewing in themselves yet, and need professional input. "You need specific technicians assigned to designing camera placement in online gaming," says Boiston. "Get a guy from the BBC or ESPN, get their logos on there"

"I'd like sound, for a start," says Plumb. "They didn't have any sound at all in the final race. And the option of having a wheel or not, or my own controller. They had two pods of three Xboxes and they didn't know how to connect them together. They were asking me how to do it."

"It was very poorly handled," agrees Pearson. "There weren't any specifics whether you could have the racing line indicator on or off, nobody knew what kind of car or track they would be racing. Dunky, one of our guys, lives on sound, he needs to hear the traction and all that."

Boiston chips in. "A key thing with these competitions I cannot stress enough: all rules should be made clear well in advance. If you took Michael Schumacher and you put him in a Minardi he'd never been in before, and it wasn't set up for him, he'd be a shambles and he'd fall off the circuit. We were seeing people who are excellent at *Forza* struggling to stay on the road. You've given it to a PR company: good. But you need people in the PR company who understand what a player needs to perform." He also recalls a fairly high-profile *Halo 2* tournament where the game was running on demo pods and in variously patched versions, so the weapons didn't have consistent power.

Pearson raised the team's complaints with Microsoft, which has apparently been attentive and "very helpful" and has sought TTR's input on the *PGR3* global tournament. They're still unsure of what to expect at the final event, but are confident of victory regardless. "I'm pretty certain one of our guys from America, Max Fatality, will just absolutely dominate it from start to finish," predicts Pearson. "He's going to walk away with it."

Like McLaren F1, this player is just 14 years of age, which raises the problem of promoting gamers as sponsorship-attracting personalities when they're often shy teenagers. Boiston turns the argument around. "Look at Kimi Raikonnen [then running second equal in the F1 Driver's Championship], I've never known a guy as boring. But because sportsmen are on TV they have a PR that helps them perform." He's dismissive of Allard's webcam vision as too difficult to police: "I just think to myself, how are you going to make people behave responsibly? You've got enough twats online anyway..." The answer to bolstering the reputation of virtual sport and sportsmen, the team feels, is TV coverage, although not necessarily broadcast.

"I envisage a rolling TV news channel available on Live," suggests Pearson. "That's the way to keep everybody involved. It's OK to have these little banners flash up, but you want to see interviews, see what's happening in other games." Boiston has a more controversial view: "The information is important, but some kind of gambling aspect, sorry to say, is where sport takes off." That, he feels, is when competitive gaming will start to draw a wider audience than just other competitive gamers, but platform holders may balk at the prospect.

"I envisage a rolling TV news channel available on Live. That's the way to keep everybody involved. You want interviews, to see what's happening in other games"

Never mind the outside world, will gamers ever consider themselves sportsmen? Plumb denies it, but Boiston adds: "In a way it doesn't feel like a sport, but if you ask a darts player or a snooker player who's just won £200k at a tournament, he might say: 'I dunno, I've been playing down the Labour club with my Dad since I was six. It's second nature.' But are you ever going to beat that snooker player? No, never in a million years. Like if you were to play Adam now. You're never going to beat him."

OUT THERE



SILENT BID



It's not often you stumble across an eBay auction titled "Extinguisher Covered w/Blood & Bile!!" and even rarer to find one with a flurry of frantic hopeful bidding, but just days after the movie's cinema release, Silent Hill fans were pleased to find a huge array of official props up for bids on the site. Though thankfully the remainder of the auctions remained generally bile-free, not all could promise to be free of blood, including star Rose's cardigan. Other items on the block included horror mainstay decrepit and weathered dolls, Silent Hill tourist maps, and of course school desks, but sadly not a single presence-detecting transistor radio.

www.ebay.com

FILM

Silence breaks

Christophe Gans' meticulous adaptation glows in the dark, then opens its mouth

What nettles a movie critic more? Being sidelined by an audience it doesn't understand or being sidelined by Hollywood itself? Prior to its release last month, Silent Hill breached the pundit code on both counts, joining a dubious handful of movies to have snubbed the tradition of advanced press screenings and given the public, so the excuse always goes, first dibs. Of that handful, all but the rarest gem have been overwhelmingly panned.

But Silent Hill threatens to justify itself during its opening half, the alibi being that like the recent spate of movies geared towards the US bible belt, it's only appreciable by its intended audience. The set-up is economical. Rose, a composite of the series' protagonists played by Radha Mitchell, is at loggerheads with husband Chris (Sean Bean) over

The movie marches to the beat of videogame structure, which for that first half involves a trek through the unknown, interrupted by stunning flights from perfectly adapted terrors

daughter Sharon's sleepwalking. Why is she drawn to the brink of a nearby waterfall, crying the name 'Silent Hill' as she's frantically woken? How can she be cured? The answer, of course, is on Google: an abandoned coal-mining town struck from modern maps and desolated by fires that still burn beneath its streets. Chris returns home to find mother and child gone; unbeknownst to him, they've already crossed over.

The movie marches to the beat of videogame structure, which for that first half involves a largely captivating trek through the unknown, interrupted by stunning flights from perfectly adapted terrors. It's hallucinatory, urgently navigated by characters defined by impulse, and as such is every bit the defiant interpretation hoped for. The theatre murmurs with recognition of its painstakingly re-enacted scenes, joins it in its trance and then gasps at its inevitable highlight, the five-minute warpath of Pyramid Head. And then, less than an hour into a two hour movie, a more awkward silence falls.

This is a videogame movie finally, vicariously created by fans. But the religious authenticity they demand, part reflex response to the crimes of Paul Anderson and part overzealous faith in *Silent Hill*'s own gravity, has hamstrung the result. Its dialogue, lifted from the game into the mouths of professional actors, is something that leaves an acrid taste in the mouth. Condensed into a theatre-friendly (yet still dramatically overlong) running time, its story – again compiled from the themes and events of the first two games – is borderline Hammer, and at times Pythonesque. Worse still is its one studio concession – the fatal inclusionof a third vision of Silent Hill. In this really real-world version, Sean Bean succumbs to its most chilling turn of events – a redundant expository role.

This was the landmark hearing in the trial of movies versus games, and tragically it's one where the prosecution owns the stand. A masterpiece of visual adaptation, it's one in which you recoil rather than fear, and seldom for the right reasons. Forever to be damned with the faint praise of being better than Resident Evil, it's proof perfect that you only hurt the ones you love.





Retaining, or at least closely interpreting, cues from Yamaoka's scores is a thoughtful touch, but one undermined by repeated ducks out of *Silent Hill*'s canonical universe





Recognisable moments from the first two games will either put tingles through those in the know or send them into apoplexy over the often mawkish delivery of lines and effects







Win a week at Climax

A rare chance to step behind the curtain and see how games are really made

The STAR Awards, a national awards scheme for those who work in the learning and skills sector, has teamed up with Climax to offer an exceptional bursary: a week-long placement at one of Climax's studios to gain a firsthand insight into how games are created. Please note, however, there is a little red tape: the competition is only open to those currently studying in that sector, which means institutions like sixth form and FE colleges, and only to those in England. So if you're at school, at university or in work, this isn't for you.

For those who are eligible, you'll need to answer the following question: 'If you could be a videogame character, who would you be, and why?' However, there's a twist – you don't need to limit yourself to existing game characters: indeed, you're encouraged to invent your own. Answers should explain the character and what makes them so appealing, and should be no longer than 500 words. Those of an artistic bent are welcome to include illustrations, but these are not required. The winner will be chosen on the basis of their creativity and understanding of character design. The closing date is July 6 and entries should be sent to joanna.braier@geronimocommunications.com, with 'Climax competition' as the subject. See www.edge-online.com for further details.

STAR Awards

For people making a difference in learning and skills

The Brighton base (above) is home to Climax Racing, makers of *MotoGP '06* (far left), and the company has other studios in London and Portsmouth where *Sudeki* (centre) was created

Continue

Capcom
Giving 360 and PSP exactly what they deserve

Cow tipping
Or, thanks to *Oblivion*'s physics, bear tipping

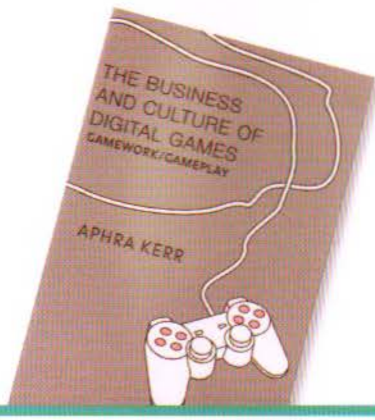
The RTS
Things are looking up for those who look down

Quit

Repetitive game injury
Ninety-nine button presses take their toll

Movie adaptations
Let's face it: they had their chance and blew it

Fake HD
Enough upscaling – either it's 720p or it isn't



Author: Aphra Kerr
Publisher: Sage
ISBN: 1 4129 0047 6

THE BUSINESS AND CULTURE OF DIGITAL GAMES

Designed as a primer for students, Aphra Kerr's book packs in a lot of well-presented information about the games industry

As an introductory text for media and game students, The Business And Culture Of Digital Games certainly covers most of the bases you'd expect. Starting with the usual potted history, it delves into the different theoretical approaches to games, as well as growing areas such as the use of games for non-entertainment purposes. At 160 pages, it's also a slim book, which is good news considering the density of information; plenty of references are presented. Written by a sociology lecturer at the National University of Ireland, it does have a tendency to veer off into areas that reflect that interest, however. The subject of games for women is one particular pressure point which receives a good deal of attention, albeit without a proportional set of firm conclusions. The chapters on the academic theories of games, and on games as a global culture more than make up for this though, with clear explanations of some convoluted issues. Indeed, perhaps the most deftly handled subject is an overview of the process of game creation. Despite being explained from the point of view of independent developers, it doesn't fall into the archetypal trap of painting publishers as the evil empire, and also provides some accurate, if generalised, breakdowns of where the cash generated at retail actually ends up. Yet, while ideal for the intake of the many game-related courses now being offered, it's probably a little too dry for a general game culture readership.



Author: Daniel Dinello
Publisher: University of Texas Press
ISBN: 0 292 709862

TECHNOPHOBIA!

This comprehensive overview of science fiction culture examines why and how the visions of scientists and artists are so divergent

Considering the vast detail with which Daniel Dinello presents the various assaults of science fiction culture – from novels to films, games and comics – on the concept of posthuman technology, this is not a book for the faint-hearted. Nor it is comfortable read for those who want to guard against inadvertently finding out the endings or highlights of media they've yet to experience. But for those interested in the interactions between scientists and their artistic equivalents, Technophobia! is nothing less than fascinating – particularly as it highlights the views of futurologists such as Marvin Minsky and Ray Kurzweil, which are as bizarre and unlikely as anything the creatives can come up with. However, you'll need that fascination: getting through the rather heavy early chapters is helped along by a knowledge of the philosophy of technology, the history of science and theology. The tone of the book also becomes surprisingly strident as it progresses, with Dinello's own opinions becoming apparent; perhaps surprisingly, considering his subject of interest, he takes a rather alarmist view on the way the world is being changed by technology. The straight retelling of well-known scenes is also heavy going – the potted Alien scenario is a particularly grinding example. But despite all these discouragements, his sheer enthusiasm for the subject is enough to carry you through, even if the visions he discusses seldom have a happy ending.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

God Hand
FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Giant floating strawberries, falling iron washtubs, angered midgets ripe for a drop kick and deadly blows to the groin. This new PS2 action game from Clover throws sanity a godly V-sign

Guitar Hero II
FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** RED OCTANE



Stay your hearts, because those are Roman numerals rather than an 11. But there's every sign that Harmonix is going one louder in November, its latest gig featuring lead, bass and rhythm tracks

Rayman 4
FORMAT: TBC **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Michel Ancel's next pits the limbless adventurer against a horde of demonic rabbits. Its cast of unique creatures should please its young audience, but it's the Revolution version that interests us

Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** EA



EA LA's efforts with *Generals* and *Zero Hour* gave the genre's forefather a strong successor. But has the grandeur of *Rise Of Legends* set a precedent that no standard RTS can conquer?

Duke Nukem Forever
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** 3D REALMS



Is it that time of year again already? Reports of 3D Realms' FPS list its status as still being pieces of a game in progress, leading us to update our definition of it from 'troubled' to 'ticking'

Ace Combat X: Skies Of Deception
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



Taito's *Over G* may not have raised the bar of technical ambition in the aerial action genre, but Namco's microlite is pushing, or at least shrinking, the envelope. Hopefully it moves with equal grace

The Ship
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** VALVE



Having floated upstream from the talent pool of the *Half-Life* modding scene to the Source, the acclaimed whodunit is now headed for release via Steam. The original beta is still available

Gitaroo-Man Live
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** KOEI



A late announcement sets up a Japanese release this month for the handheld version of Inis' crushing rhythm game. A suggested rebalancing should offset fears of its analogue nub performance

Paradise
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Designer Benoit Sokal leaves *Syberia* behind but stays within the point-and-click hemisphere. Dialogue trees will play a major part in puzzle-solving, as will a surprising second playable character



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Troy

www.experimentalgameplay.com/game.php?112423

An unually sinister ARG, conceived as part of the ever-fruitful Experimental Gameplay Project, *Troy*'s opening moment tells you more about the game's players than the game itself. Echoing the project's theme – 'violate' – its initial URL presents players with a 404 error. Those with a savvy and shameless streak tend to take it as a direct challenge, while a number of the more modest and more trusting have prematurely concluded that the experience itself was broken.

Unlike other ARGs of recent years, *Troy* doesn't position the player as one element in a larger scheme; instead, it requires that they become the aggressor and the violator, sifting through the personal life of an unaware second party. Though necessarily brief, given its one-man development team and the restrictions of the project's guidelines (*Troy* was constructed over just four days), it's still a fascinating play on net morality. Its impact, however, is softened by the nature of its promotion, leaving you wishing you were the first to hit upon that initial broken link.





The Dreamcast's Japan-only game download service offered access to a range of Megadrive and PC Engine classics. In many respects it was the direct predecessor of the similar service Nintendo has announced will be available on Revolution





SOMETHING ABOUT Japan



Too much, too soon?

Famitsu PS2's Koji Aizawa muses on the Dreamcast's online legacy



Sega's Dreamcast officially disappeared in March 2001. That's five whole years ago already! But thinking about that anniversary also got me thinking about how Japanese publishers approach the retail market – about how they think about selling games in boxes, on shelves.

A good few years before the end of the Dreamcast, Sega was already aware of issues with the traditional business model of boxed videogames. Many saw the Japanese market as leading the rest of the world (meaning the US and Europe), so people were already thinking about new ways of delivering games, since boxed copies were more and more seen as a limited solution. Online delivery of content was increasingly seen as a possible option. After all, the pioneer of all MMORPGs, *Ultima Online*, had been launched in 1997 and by 2001 neighbouring South Korea had a thriving PC-based MMORPG market.

It was into that climate that *Final Fantasy XI* was released in May 2002. Analysts predicted a huge failure following the Spirits Within movie, another very costly experiment. But against all predictions, *FFXI* became the Japanese champion on the world stage of the MMORPG and is still very much in operation now. And it's not the only MMORPG developed in Japan. There are a lot of them, smaller in scale. But *FFXI* has managed to capture the market, leaving very little for its Japanese competitors. This may sound obvious, but when it comes to MMORPGs, gamers can't play many of them at once. They mostly focus on one, and that one is usually the most popular. Being the number one is worth a lot. Since the infrastructure required to run and to manage a MMORPG is very expensive, not being the leading game can create a serious situation for the publisher: huge costs with little revenue. That explains why many companies were very reluctant to enter that market in Japan – the risk was simply too high. That situation lasted for years.

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In comparison, with the huge success of the iPod, many companies did not hesitate to jump on this booming market of direct delivery of existing content. Game companies like Bandai Namco are getting involved in Microsoft's Xbox Live Arcade service, starting with *Pac-Man*, and the company is developing more titles. Nintendo's coming Revolution will not only feature old Nintendo titles, but old competitors such as Sega (Mega Drive) and Hudson (PC Engine) have also confirmed their



Final Fantasy XI has dominated the hardware landscape just as it has dominated the software charts, making its mark on PS2, PC and Xbox 360. But has it hindered rather than helped the online market as a whole?









involvement in its download service. Even Sony is preparing such a feature for its PSP. Users will be able to download PlayStation games and run them on their portable via emulation, and retro fans must be delighted. However, game companies are also very excited about it. While it has been impossible for years, the 'one source, multi use' concept is becoming reality at last. Another big advantage of online-delivered games is the protection they provide against piracy. In a sense, from a publisher's point of view, it is like hitting two birds with one stone.

But to be honest, such a service – downloading old games – is nothing new. In May 2000, Sega had already introduced this feature for the Dreamcast. It was named 'Dream Library'. Users could buy, download and play games from the Mega Drive and PC Engine catalogue. At that time, I was editor-in-chief at Famitsu Dreamcast, and I was asked by Sega to help build the website for the project. Sega and retro fans were very happy about that service, but downloads were still quite limited in number – in a way, this service was very symbolic of Sega: launching new ideas too early.

But that's just the beginning. In Japan the mobile phone is a dynamic platform, not only for gaming. There are multiple methods to pay for a variety of services, all very easy to use. Although it is true that the security issue of online payment is still holding some people back from using their credit cards to make purchases, all in all there have never been more ways for publishers to sell their games direct to gamers. It is too early to see if online downloads of games will reach the same level of popularity that iTunes has for online music downloads. I don't think that it will be mainstream for some time. But I think it's important that these new services succeed, not just because they make business sense, but because they can help preserve gaming culture. And, for that – and because they remind me of the Dreamcast – I want to support them. See you!

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars



We're still enjoying the aftershocks of *Battlefield*, but the epicentre of online warfare's next shake-up will lie elsewhere. PC owners' savings accounts must already be afraid.
PC, ACTIVISION

Scarface: The World Is Yours



In all the talk of movie adaptations, it's easy to forget how sound a job Radical did with the Hulk. Can it bring the same ultimate destruction to Tony Montana's volatile world?
PC, PS2, XBOX, VIVENDI

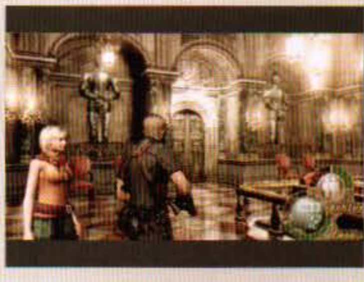
New Super Mario Bros



A taste at GDC only built a hunger for more. It's still too early to tell if this can do all it promises to, but what's guaranteed is that initial moment of familiar intoxication.
DS, NINTENDO

The fairy godfather

What if someone could answer your gaming wishes?



If, as a company, your current benchmark of quality is *Resident Evil 4*, just how much more do you have to achieve next time round?

Allowing that gaming is supposed to be an exercise in wish fulfilment, it's amazing how often you're left saying 'if only'. If only developers didn't abandon existing consoles as soon as newer, shiner machines arrived. If only they didn't chase photorealism instead of exploring the infinite possibilities of more creative visual styles. If only they could knit together the contrasting trends of eastern and western gaming tradition. If only they could take something from films that enriched rather than diluted games. If only the vivid intensity of old classics, both in their look and their gameplay, could be reproduced in modern games. But look through this month's Hype section and you'll see that all those hopes add up to only one real wish: if only more developers were Capcom.

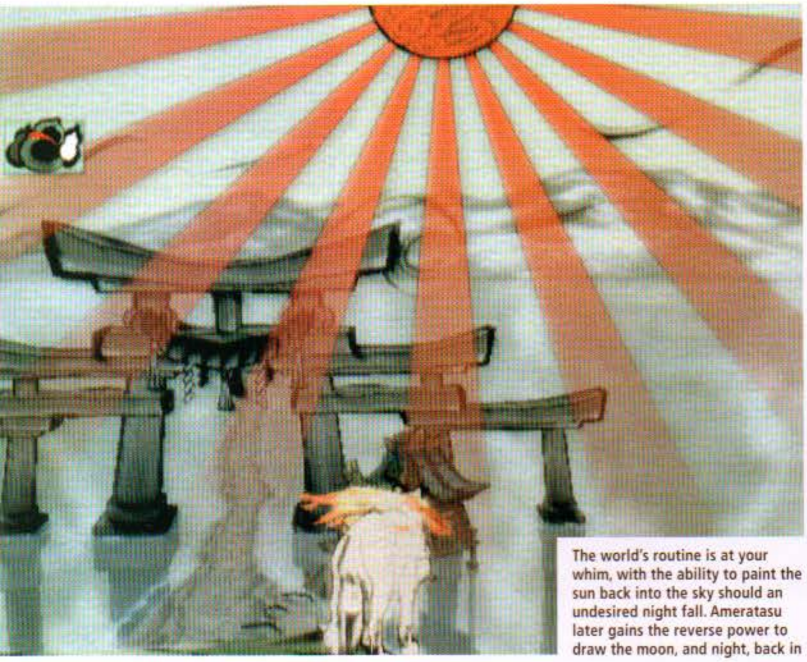
As prestige PS2 games begin to dry up, the lure of *Okami* glows ever brighter – and brighter still thanks to its staggering artistic direction. Holding its own effortlessly against the more clinical accomplishments of current 360 games, its glorious unreality is luminously and organically engaging. But if it is something on the new hardware that you want, then *Lost Planet* brings together the insect-swarm busyness of Japanese action games with the punchy action of a western run'n'gun. And, in a month when Silent Hill has added yet more fuel to the pyre of the relationship between games and films, *Dead Rising* arrives to show that through a savvy choice of inspiration and a clarity of execution, the two can prove very worthy bedfellows. Finally comes the PSP's *Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins*, to prove that everything old can be new again, and that freshness doesn't have to be sacrificed for faithfulness.

Capcom, of course, doesn't have the monopoly on these accomplishments, but it does, for the moment, have the monopoly on demonstrating them with such depth and consistency. The two big strategic decisions it has taken over the past years – the first the explosion of creativity that was the Capcom Five, the second to look to western markets for both inspiration and financial success – have produced a portfolio that does real justice to its visionary creators and talented teams. And that turns an 'if only' into a hopeful 'where next?'

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **CLOVER STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JPN), SEPTEMBER (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E151, E152, E156**

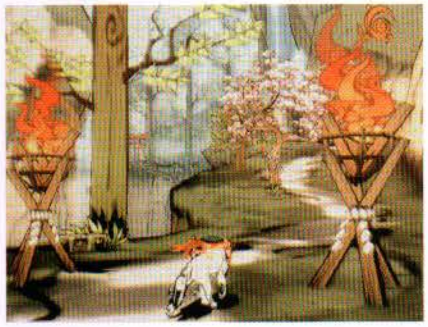
Okami

Clover's nature adventure marks the lucky fourth release for the studio, and there's little idle about its idyll



The world's routine is at your whim, with the ability to paint the sun back into the sky should an undesired night fall. Ameratasu later gains the reverse power to draw the moon, and night, back in









One of *Okami*'s several currencies is happiness, created by Ameratasu's good deeds and used to boost her vitalities. Bonus happiness can be gained by locating and feeding the world's wildlife

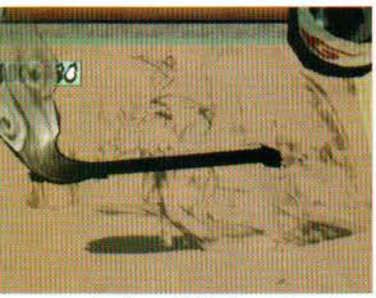
You have to start with the visuals, even after two years of starting with the visuals: *Okami*'s style is its substance, and that substance has continually strengthened over a course of gradual, perfectionist tweaking. No matter how dedicated its conceit is to Japanese brushwork – the filigree of parchment visible when the backlighting is at its strongest, the way shadows aren't cast so much as left to run – seeing the game on paper belies its scale. Clover has appreciated that the PS2 is far more capable dealing with size than detail, and accordingly seems to have drawn out nearly every section of *Okami*'s world in neck-craning panorama.

If taking in these landscapes at full, breathless pelt isn't overwhelming enough, there's the discovery that *Okami* has the content to fill out that scale. Though *The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess*' wolfen addition was a coincidental development, it could almost be a karmic handover for how thoroughly observant Clover has been of *Zelda*'s template. Carefully paced, laced with secrets, plotted forwards and backwards to accommodate gradually awarded abilities: *Okami*'s structure is as well established as its artistic influence. But the language of play is unmistakably Clover's. It gently deflates the game's legendary importance with slapstick sight gags and wink-to-camera wordplay, and echoes *Viewtiful Joe* in the brushstroke mechanic's subversion of expected game flow.

As befits a sun goddess (or a videogame player), Ameratasu has the power to suspend her world's movement at any moment – pulling back from the land to reveal it in the process of being painted, opening it to the addition of your own curls of ink. Daub the ground and flowers bloom; slash a streak through most objects and they cleanly fall in two. With great power comes, at first, no responsibility, and the temptation to fell trees and scatter possessions is irresistible, even encouraged. But then you're given abilities t remake – painting a sun into the sky to reset the day-night cycle at will or restoring life to barren trees in a swirl of blossom – and experimental destruction turns to capricious creation. Though many brush techniques require a specific trigger to allow a familiar action, such as floating lotus blossoms providing grapple points, they still invite flair – paint a looping trail rather than a functional straight line, or leap Ameratasu out above water before summoning a lily-pad to land on.

> Carefully paced, laced with secrets, plotted forwards and backwards to accommodate gradually awarded abilities: Okami's structure is as established as its artistic influence

Battle invites you to revel in your divine advantage even more, with brush technique doubling or tripling as combat powers. Some have obvious applications: the slash brushstroke cuts through as many enemies a it's drawn across, or acts as a guard-breaker or finisher, and the bombs previously – and predictably – used to open cracked rock wall can be drawn into existence with a flourish, then rolled into a turtling foe. Others are more playful, springing trees to knock enemies back or form a fleeting barrier to projectile attacks, or simply flicking a blindin splotch of ink in lesser enemies' faces. As





Brushstrokes can finish off a stricken vulture samurai (left) or coil a path to a grapple point. Each technique performed – or attempted, if your linework misses the mark – drains Ameratasu's ink supply





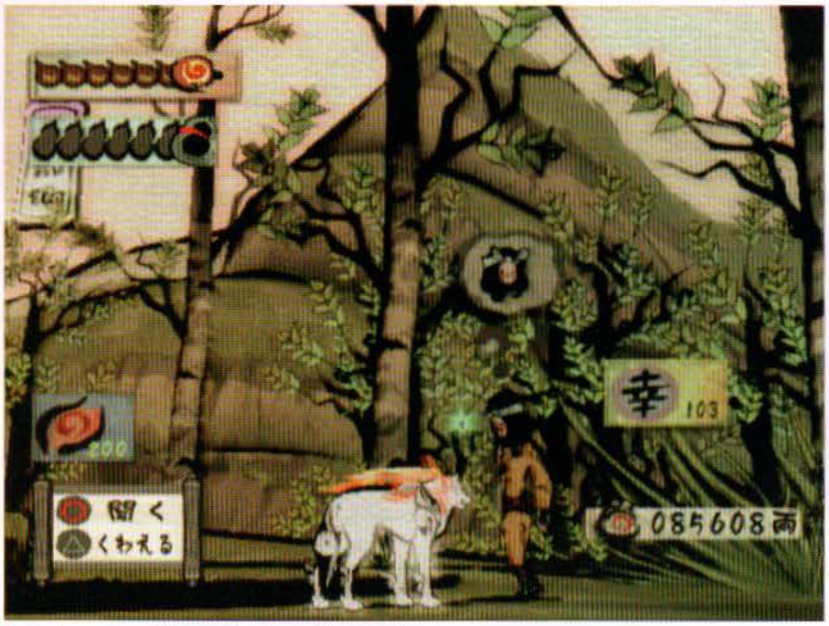


New brush techniques are delivered by other members of the celestial animal family, arriving with a variety act routine after their star sign is traced in the night sky



Quick draw

Okami's supporting cast is very much in need of support: some from simple quests, others from one-off minigames. One recurring character, a washed-up swordsman believing himself to be the hero of the piece, requires divine intervention via QTE-style cutscenes, following up his inept slashes with a more decisive brushstroke cut. Similarly, the major boss fights hinge on well-timed brushwork to immobilise their colossal forms and expose their weak point.



An interface waits to slide in to *Okami*'s unspoilt view at the slightest provocation, and the menu summoned with a Start button press is terrifyingly dense, even by Capcom standards



there's no real pressure on your Stylish Calligraphic Action ability other than your own satisfaction, the stop-and-start mechanic rapidly loses its sense of artificiality and blends with the theme of luxurious improvisation.

Combat is also further proof that *Okami* isn't paper-thin without its style: though slow-burning in its introduction, the system has the weight of Hideki Kamiya's previous work on *VJ* and *Devil May Cry*. Simply connecting chained hits in early scrapes is a delight (necessarily so, as there's little else Ameratasu is capable of at that stage), but further moves and combos can be learned from trainers, and new shields, necklaces, and swords found to replace her flaming shield – or supplement it. Set in a secondary slot, the whip-like necklace weapons provide a ranged attack, whereas shields offer a block that can also be used for a split-second lethal counterattack.

In action and movement, it's an astonishingly solid attempt to provide for every possible play style and unite them in a world so summer-ripe that every moment is a reward. Its caveats seem few, and may not even be caveats: for much of the early- to mid-game, there's little sign of real difficulty (though localisation may yet adjust this), and the backup energy reserves Ameratasu stores from devouring local delicacies won't even be called upon by most players. The sheer extent of *Okami*'s optional to-do list is staggering, and for completists the claim of 60 hours of play shouldn't rely on 20 of them being spent transfixed by its beauty. And for all the trust Clover has in the player finding their own entertainment, it's too much the overprotective parent, doling out constant expository tutorials and manic hand-holding through Ameratasu's chirpy insect sidekick.

For a game that has to start with the visuals as its talking point, *Okami* should prove Clover to be far from an art-house studio. It's as confident in its grasp of traditional Japanese videogame style as of traditional Japanese artistic style – a strength that might just plant the seed for the goddess game genre upon western arrival.



Though transformations from lifeless to verdant are scripted, you can't help but feel responsible for returning the world's beauty – a sleight-of-design that connects strongly with the player

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q1 2007**

Lost Planet

Hoping to thaw its Japanese reputation, Inafune's firefight turns the heat on 360



Wayne's sets of animations and poses are markedly more natural than those of previous actioners. When spun in 90-degree increments, he'll pivot his torso and only hop his feet into position when pushed past full stretch





Vital Suit weapons – Gatling guns, shotguns, rocket launchers and the like – are attractive propositions whether you're in one or not. The roaming Wayne can brandish them at waist height if the desire grabs him, though the effect on his mobility is a predictably severe one

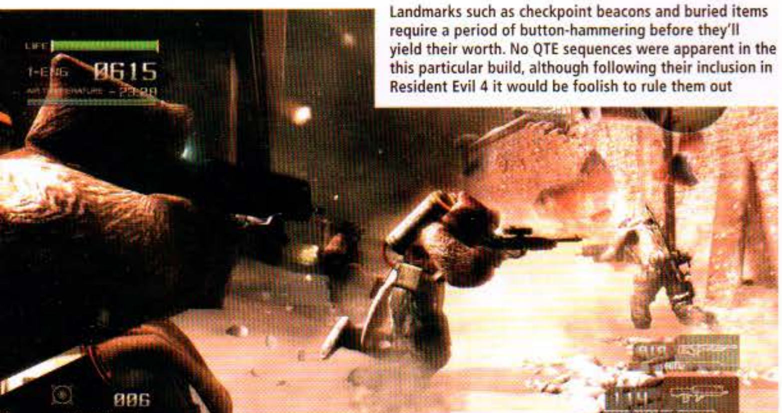
Overlapping circles mightn't mean a great deal in Japan, their poorly-communicated message only stoking the country's apathy for the Xbox 360 brand, but to Keiji Inafune and his seemingly sorcerous team at Production Studio 4, Microsoft's ring of light is just a wider lens for shooting bigger interactive pictures. *Lost Planet*'s vision of beauty, beasts and man versus nature places it alongside *Onimusha* at the more colourful end of its producer's repertoire. If *Dead Rising* is to be his cult homage for 2006, then this is most definitely a balls-out blockbuster for the post-Christmas lull. Led by actual cinema poster-boy Lee Byung-Hun, its cast of nimble mechs, nomadic bandits and insect-like goliaths is an invasion force for both western and eastern shores. But while much of the visual and narrative design hankers for global appeal, it's the implementation that makes this early glimpse a crowd-puller.

A handful of pop culture imports have been tossed into *Lost Planet*'s pot: mechs akin to those of Masamune Shirow's Appleseed, a frozen hinterland inspired by John Carpenter's The Thing and a high concept that James Cameron would applaud. But unlike that of *FEAR*, Inafune's deference to his idols can be quite obscure, drawing flavours from their works rather than plagiarising them wholesale. The game transpires in a wasteland peppered with relics of fallen man – most likely a ravaged Earth, but for now no one's saying. Scattered bands of survivors fight amongst themselves for control of the planet's scant thermal energy reserves, without which no one endures its hostile climate. Similarities with *Onimusha*, already apparent in the casting of recognised acting talent and an Arc de Triomphe-like structure visible in an early trailer, continue with the player's ability to siphon energy from both destructible containers and vanquished foes, and then build further once those enemies are revealed. Humans, inevitably, aren't the only contestants for this dying world.

Scattered bands of survivors fight amongst themselves for control of the planet's scant thermal energy reserves, without which no one endures its hostile climate

Genes from the more imposing creatures of *Devil May Cry*, the insect Genma of *Onimusha* and, we almost needn't add, the insectoid hordes of Starship Troopers have been spliced to create this game's equivalent: an armour-plated infestation known as the Akrid. The smaller of them attack en masse, the larger step in as bosses, and they all share a weak spot in the thermal energy sac that keep them an inch from freezing stiff. There's the sense in *Lost Planet* that for each of its inhabitants there's a ticking clock, and

Landmarks such as checkpoint beacons and buried items require a period of button-hammering before they'll yield their worth. No QTE sequences were apparent in the this particular build, although following their inclusion in Resident Evil 4 it would be foolish to rule them out





Akrid drones offer a decent menu of weak spots for the discerning executioner. Legs will snap off and leave them floundering in the snow, while a clean shot to the thermal energy sac will freeze them instantaneously before a second blast shatters them into pieces







Two weapons can be attached to a Vital Suit at any one time, each bound to a trigger. A clean and informative reticule ensures that ammo stocks are always known, and appeals for a reload should combat addle your senses

Inafune's latest enthusiasm is clearly for that other cinematic device, the environment as ruthless antagonist. Three gauges monitoring air temperature, health and thermal energy reserves determine the urgency of your approach, and because the game only endorses the all-guns-blazing approach *most* of the time, you can be assured of moments when sustaining the latter will be your foremost concern.

Lost Planet has noted – and this is reassuring having previously observed the encumbered plod of hero Wayne and of the Vital Suits he can occupy – that urgent combat requires immediate controls. Regardless of your vehicle (be it foot or the aforementioned mechs), a bumper button tap will instantly flick you 90 degrees, doing so time and again should circumstances demand. A *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*-style separation of camera and reticule produces a precise and manageable targeting system, and the charge-and-blast nature of the game's stock weapons binds multiple firing modes to single buttons. It's an uncluttered yet adequate model. The Vital Suits, lying discarded at opportune locations throughout levels, are indeed weighty, but also blissfully free of ceremony. During both target acquisition and momentary flight (supported by certain models only) they're deceptively agile, never surrendering the lethality that their great and varied armaments suggest.

These considerations are demonstrable now, in two levels at least, in a game that isn't due for the best part of a year. That's achievement enough. The advancement of Infaune's other ambition, however – to raise the roof of videogame spectacle – marks the extraordinary rate of his team's progress. *Lost Planet* is already a blitzkrieg of Xbox 360's power and an honest E3 demo for Microsoft, free of any caveat of unpreparedness. Though it's selective in assigning destructibility to its environment, it showers particle effects and geometry in earnest when those moments come. Being snowbound has given the game an incessant opportunity to bring life to its frame, specks of snow cascading from rooftops, weaving gently in the wind and rising from the ground when disturbed. Being frozen also gives its scenery cause to pull off every trick of light that gaming has thus far explored.

But as its schedule suggests, much more is to come. Production Studio 4 has set its stage, equipped its actors and devised its effects; what remains is for its story to be spun and its action unfurled beyond this stand-out clip. Wayne's ability to grapple himself to nearby elevations has given *Lost Planet* a free hand in terms of level design, but the combat mechanics he enjoys at present are of questionable long-term worth. He packs thrilling firepower and carries it with a burdened grace, but will his ordeal of Akrid spawns, circle-strafing showdowns and snow pirate ambushes know when to make way for the other facets of a well-rounded epic?



Frozen connection

Inafune may be wisely prioritising the mechanics and drama of his game over the maxims of Microsoft's 360 brand, but *Lost Planet* still acknowledges their practical possibilities. A wealthy multiplayer mode is being developed that should tie in nicely with its foundations of mech duelling and run-and-gun assault. Details as to the different game types have yet to be disclosed, but Live support will be predictably strong while downloadable content opportunities are also being considered. It isn't hard to imagine an *Outtrigger*-style experience based on the existing boss arenas and efficient rate of play, though something more than deathmatch would be appreciated.



FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **PANDEMIC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**





Mercenaries: World In Flames

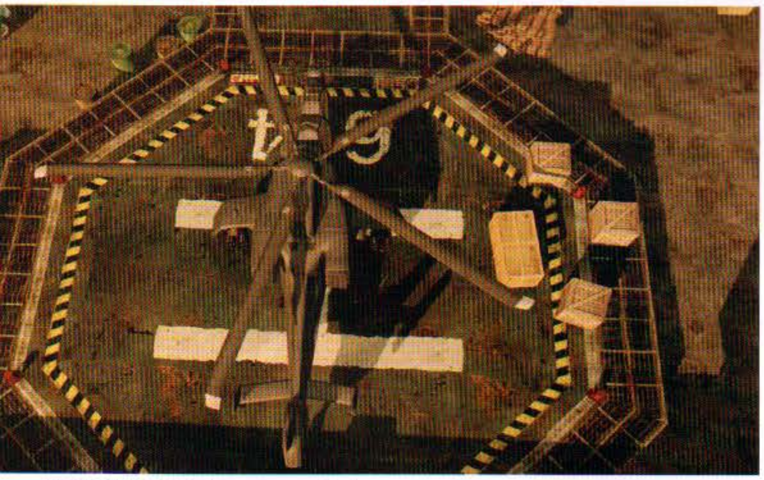
Destroy all humans, plants, animals, vehicles, buildings, furnishings, obstacles, combustibles, edibles, rock, pape...

"*Mercenaries* always wanted to be a next-gen game," admits **Josh Resnick**, chairman of Pandemic. "It's pretty simple: The more stuff we can support, the more fun it gets. I've just been tearing up this amazing looking, super-detailed, high-definition city in a test build of the game [its newly announced sequel] and my heart is seriously still racing. The sheer amount of destruction we can accomplish on the new system is close to overwhelming."

Having last year ramped up the action genre's capacity for free-roaming chaos, *Mercenaries* has evidently lost none of its aptitude for escalation. Its developer's recent partnership with Bioware has conversely instilled no desire to complicate the game's moral landscape, leaving it with the same bullet point creed. Rule one: Everybody pays. Rule two: Everybody tries to avoid paying. Rule three: See rule one. With its singular desire to blow up the outside world, the series' debut drafted itself an auspicious manifesto for gaming's physics-based, spectacle-driven future. But that game – something we concluded in **E**147 was a 'brilliant sequel waiting to happen' – isn't beyond the reproach of its creator.

"Overall, we're really proud of what we achieved. *Mercenaries* was the number one

"Whenever we add something – like air strikes or support delivery – we go the extra mile to figure out how to make it work everywhere, not just at the scripted moment"



selling new IP of 2005, which was pretty exciting for us. Having said that, I wince every time I play it – there're so many areas where we can improve. One of the biggest criticisms levelled at us was the fiction. I think the first game had a strong premise – 'Nukes in North Korea!' – but we didn't fare very well making the world deep, stylish and compelling. So that's an area we want to improve; we're working on that 'brilliant sequel' for you."

And for Sony also, it seems. Though no one's confirming long-term exclusivity, development of *World In Flames* is targeting PS3 as its primary battleground. Topically staging another no-nonsense premise in an oil-rich, war-torn Venezuela, its developer sees the new hardware generation as an excuse to move beyond the idea of the action game into a so-called 'action world.' The motivation for that apparent grandstanding is that while 'game' denotes a script, and thereby limits, a world can combine incidental action moments to greater overall effect.

World In Flames' revised economy means that allies will no longer be alone in rewarding high profile hits. Any of the game's factions will offer bounties for those they're keen to see removed, more popular targets finding themselves with multiple potential assassins



Resnick elaborates: "First, we insist that everything be general purpose. Whenever we add something – like the air strikes or the support delivery – we go the extra mile to figure out how to make it work everywhere, not just at the scripted moment. Also, we're able to integrate every system into a unified, reactive world. We track a lot of information about what you do, how you do it, and who you do it to, and have the world respond. We use the general term 'reactivity' to express this idea – the world has a response for practically everything you do. Some of the responses are immediate and funny, such as when a civilian berates you for knocking over his food, while some are longer term consequences – an ally rewarding you for services rendered, for example."

It's hoped that by widening the original game's network of both interdependent and isolated characters, its representation of life as a hired gun will be deepened. An



The engine, built from the ground up to handle this specific genre on the latest console hardware, seeks to convert the opportunities of new architecture into new and practical sandbox furniture, ducking the threat of being hamstrung by outdated methods

Loving the alien

Despite its heavily characterised, mischievous approach, Pandemic's *Destroy All Humans* proved another bittersweet action sandbox. Resnick maintains that while an immersive play experience is no less achievable than a soulful one, combining the two can be challenging. "It's true, it's really tough to populate a world with interesting stuff and have it all be great. In a way, *Mercenaries* and *Destroy All Humans* are opposites. The first *Mercenaries* really worked on the visceral gameplay level, but not on the story level. Humans had a funny and compelling world, but was a bit uneven on the gameplay. If you could merge the two together – have this mean little alien Jack Nicholson hunting down the Deck of 52 in North Korea – what a game!"

overhauled factions system promises to incorporate dynamically regulated allegiances and vendettas, each of which will have its own unique risks and benefits attached.

"The more general purpose mechanics and interactions we can support," Resnick continues, "the more emergent the game becomes. One of the new general purpose toys we're giving players, for instance, is an entirely new take on dynamic fire. I've always wanted to do something interesting with it. I blame my grandfather, who was a rampant pyromaniac, but it's such a complicated, organic thing that it was always too scary to tackle. The power of the next-gen systems gives us enough bandwidth to make it a useful, tactical tool for players."

If its bravado is to be believed, then Pandemic's claim of PS3 receiving "a good workout" at *World In Flames*' hands will serve as encouragement to those concerned about the console's early line-up. The number of studios expressing optimism, enthusiasm and even outright excitement over devkits continues to grow, calming further fears over the manageability of its architecture. It's too early to predict whether such technology can set the world of *Mercenaries* alight, but these early wisps of smoke send a positive signal.



One cited aim is for *Mercenaries* to 'expand inwards', vehicles featuring landing gear, weak points, crumple zones and multiple articulated parts. Buildings can be destroyed in a variety of ways, the game modelling everything from skyscraper collapses to localised crumbling. Halves of houses can be left standing as a result





The quirky visual filters that graced earlier *MotoGPs* are absent from *'06*. What rams home their exclusion is *PGR3's* photo mode, which would have been very welcome with wireframe and sketch-style filters in tow

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **CLIMAX**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JUNE 9**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E158**

MotoGP '06

MotoGP trades its Ultimate Racing Technology tag for the annual update 'cycle. Can Climax's bikes still excite?

Climax's original *MotoGP* was one of the earliest and finest exploiters of the analogue strengths of the Xbox pad, even before the Controller S arrived to soothe western hands. And it's one aspect that sits comfortably with the 360's pad, in a game where racing isn't so much a case of learning when to ease off the accelerator, as how to manipulate the front brake, rear brake and rider's weight distribution as well.

It's a series that benefits from clarity, and HD is understandably kind to its cause, sharply tracing out the clean lines and low peripheral detail of the game's traditional GP tracks. The unrelenting draw distance is flattered by depth of field effects, while trackside objects make murky reflections in the shimmer of rain-sodden tarmac. It may not be as out-and-out impressive as other visual posers, but it is smooth and convincing, and capable of achieving a terrific sense of motion.

Things aren't as clinically striking in Extreme Mode, *MotoGP's* street-racing expansion that was introduced with last year's *MotoGP 3* on Xbox, though. Its streets and buildings border on the basic when viewed up-close or when passing slowly – close relatives of *Ridge Racer 6's* flat props – but everything feels equally optimised for quick and responsive play. That play is slightly more forgiving than the standard GP, and can feel rowdier as a consequence. Environmental collisions are less punishing, with the player only receiving time penalties for wall contact and not just for leaving the track, and the mode brings with it its own selection of 600-1,200cc bikes. It's an initiation that's perhaps better suited to those intimidated by the cleanliness of the mainstream races, but irritatingly can only be fully accessed by completing a whole GP season. An unlockable 'Legend' difficulty is retained for those who wish to push their technique to strenuous limits.

It's a game that's unlikely to set any precedents, being more an update of the approach established with *MotoGP URT 3* – and one which, in terms of features, will seem slim to those well-versed in that game – but it's one that sits as comfortably with the technology as the original did with Xbox. And, crucially, it still feels to be a racing experience that's capable of satisfying anyone with an appreciation of strong control and subtle feedback, as well as real-world followers of the sport, which means it could easily reassert *MotoGP* as an early Xbox Live favourite once again in this latest hardware generation.



Kickstart

Each circuit of the GP offers the player a pair of challenges which can be tackled at leisure. They're hardly inventive, often crunching aspects of the track itself into a bitesize chunk, but provide excellent training. There are some echoes of *Gran Turismo's* licence tests in there, nailing a series of track-characteristic hairpins within tight time limits, or simply successfully shadowing a single racer. Further help is offered by a cornering aid, an arrow prompt that shows an upcoming turn in the track and which glows red if the player's speed is excessive.





While not as pleasurable as that of *Forza*, there's a detailed decal editor, allowing for logos with multiple layers built from text, scalable shapes and clipart





The game covers the 2005/6 seasons, with both selectable from the main menu. Xbox Live modes are available for up to 16 players, and inclusively so – just one console will allow four players to head online via splitscreen



As is typical form for the series, *MotoGP '06* does a good job of integrating complex racing with every analogue portion of the pad









In topically next-gen fashion, Capcom has fashioned an overwhelming volume of interactive content to fill your limited inventory. Swords, parasols, hockey sticks (complete with puck projectiles) and full-sized benches are only the beginning, though all break with repeat use



Dead Rising

The new face of survival horror finally starts groaning the groan and shuffling the shuffle

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151, E156**

Dead Rising is, as it always hoped to be, a bloodbath let from the wrists of George A Romero. It's an obvious remark for a game that calls itself survival action, sets itself in a shopping mall, fills itself with zombies and has itself a genocide. But Keiji Inafune's eye for the particulars of the silver screen Dead, specifically for its Dawn, has developed a finer focus than even optimism led us to expect. As symbolised by the tweaked face of hero Frank West, this is a game that's taken one giant lurch towards better-functioning form.

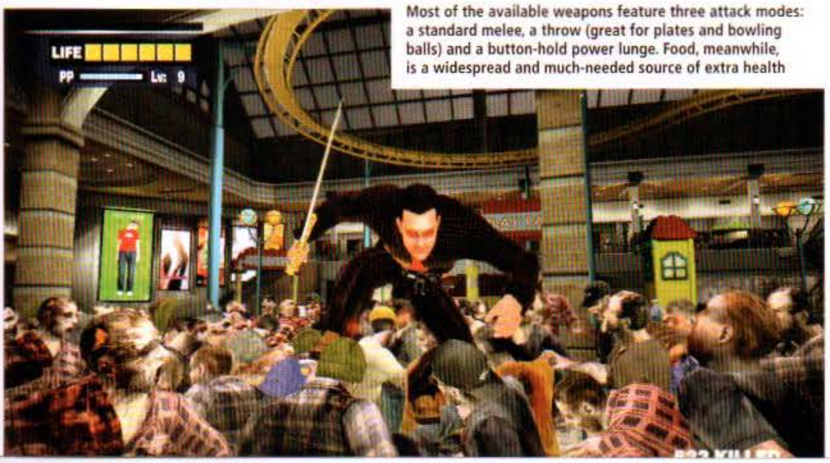
The underlying design is the same – a mission-driven sandbox of satire and glamorised gore. But this 80 per cent complete version revels in deeper homage. Fragile allegiances look set to bind its disparate cast of suburban caricatures, each of whom has an innocuous domestic talent that will come to their aid when the time is right. The opposition, meanwhile, benefits not from the singularly cannibalistic pursuit AI of *Resident Evil*, but from an authentically comedic blend of hunger and past life routine. Admittedly, only one example springs to mind – that of a zombie cop mindlessly gesturing his pistol at another before opening fire – but as an impromptu gag it's a winner and as a mark of spiritual inheritance it's immediately familiar.

The foremost of these common bonds, though, is escape. Of the game's many outcomes, the preferred is escape via a helicopter that arrives after a given number of simulated hours (72 or 48 depending on difficulty level). Minor and sub-objectives are peppered throughout, and into them will step a secondary character that's all Capcom: the locked and loaded femme fatale. But just as Romero had it, *Dead Rising*'s raison d'etre is to have fun at the expense of the dead, and have it in every style that consumerism affords. Think *Dynamite Cop* fought out through the pages of the Argos catalogue and you have a sense of the scale.

Arsenal and enemies present themselves faster than you can use one against the other, though as you'll remember from X05 that was as much a source of weakness as strength. With the disclaimer of it being prototype code, you couldn't swing a bat in last year's build without suffering a carnivorous hug, together with its required bout of frantic stick waggling. Reassuringly, a more selective dispersal pattern of zombies and a nimble jump/kick combination have all but alleviated that flaw, and an upgrade system based on photography points (see 'Lens scare') hopes to redress it further.

But the real prestige points for *Dead Rising* – and yes, there's an echo in this magazine – go to Capcom's tenacious grasp of 360 architecture. The game has run the rollercoaster in almost every department, its load times and framerate still awaiting optimisation. But in terms of anti-aliasing, depth of field, bump-mapping and other such anxieties, it's a conquest that shames the supposition that the Japanese, with this machine, simply aren't trying.





Most of the available weapons feature three attack modes: a standard melee, a throw (great for plates and bowling balls) and a button-hold power lunge. Food, meanwhile, is a widespread and much-needed source of extra health



Lens scare

Frank West's background as a photojournalist, worn not so much on his sleeve as around his neck, has always promised to send a few ripples through *Dead Rising*'s design. A fantastic lead-in sequence leaves you in little doubt as to what form they'll take – a trademark Capcom combo gauge. As you fly by helicopter towards a fateful shopping spree, enough gruesome set-pieces transpire below to make Clancy's Ghost squad cry into their visors. The more zombies you capture on film (via a firstperson snapshot mode), the more points you score, and once inside the mall you'll be treated to a grand menu of upgrades and – you'll like this – costumes to spend them on.



FORMAT: **GBA**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **BROWNIE BROWN**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**

Mother 3



A decade later, Nintendo's dark horse RPG rides again. But will it be another Mother only Japan can love?



The challenge in localising the series is in capturing its creator's penchant for pun and poetry. The names of nearly all enemies are heavily local plays on words. Those pictured here translate more simply to 'monkeywalrus'

In a curious way, it could be said that the fervour behind the western *Earthbound* cult community has as much to do with the games it hasn't seen as with the one it has. Three years after the release of the SNES *Earthbound*, released in Japan as *Mother 2*, the discovery of a fully-translated internal-use cart of the NES original, known now as *Earthbound Zero*, fuelled in series fans the perception of a near vendetta by Nintendo to shield them from creator Shigesato Itoi's work. After a 700-page fan-prepared petition proved powerless to prevent the N64 sequel's eventual cancellation, their feeling was again underscored by the company's more recent decision to withhold the GBA's *Mother 1+2* collection from western release, despite having completed English scripts for both titles, and its reuse of the upgraded *Earthbound Zero* code it had prepared for America but never let loose.

That's not to say, though, that what the west has seen wasn't worth the dedication. Effortlessly unique, the SNES's *Earthbound* was noteworthy not just for its peculiar position as a firstparty RPG from a company classically shy of the genre. Its pedestrian setting, a modern day urban tale skewed with '50s sci-fi B-movie Americana, its supporting cast, with adolescent hero Ness making frequent phone calls to both his mother and his estranged, never-present father (an intimate detail Itoi admits was taken from his own childhood), and its disconnected non-sequitur humour and dialogue all presented a startling and memorable eccentric vision of RPGs – something typical of a creator with no formal background in games.

And now its sequel, some 12 years later, looks ready to carry on every bit of that tradition. Rendered in pixel-crisp clarity and with far more detailed animations that don't reinvent so much as pay tribute to its design lineage, the game's initial chapters also show those previous themes of estrangement now much more engrained. The first chapter alone pulls the game into blacker territory with deadbeat father Flint reluctantly rejoining and violently lashing out at his family, and dealing with a sudden death close to home. Though there are still flashes of oddball levity and overarching themes of an alien invasion, the game is clearly working at greater depths than before. As with *Mother 2*, its battles are instigated by making contact with free-roaming overworld enemies, which leads to familiar, psychedelically-tinged turn-based battles, that now, unexpectedly, contain a rhythmic twist (see 'Fight the rhythm').

As always, though, the million-dollar question remains whether, given the commercial challenge inherent in the disparity of its kid-friendly pastel hues and murkier themes, this will be Nintendo's time to finally reunite the series with its western fanbase.



Each chapter promises to highlight the experiences of a unique character, with others joining up as members of a following party. While the split might lead to a less epic tale than the journey undertaken by Ness, its new pacing should nonetheless be more satisfying in shorter bursts, which is in turn perfect for its new portable GBA form





What's initially striking about *Mother 3* is how easily it can muster complex emotions like longing, loneliness, deep shame and regret even with such an elementary flat-shaded palette and restrained pixel pantomime





Fight the rhythm

While still holding true to *Earthbound*'s slowly-rolling hit point counter that allows enough reaction time to cast a quick heal and save a player from sudden death, *Mother 3*'s combat has been upgraded with a new combo system linked to its variety of battle music. By pressing the attack button to the beat of the occasionally oddly-signatured themes, each character can do extra damage with a musical accompaniment. It's a simple addition but does wonders for turning otherwise mundane turn-based battles into a unique challenge for every fight.



One of the primary joys that has gained *Mother* such a rabid fanbase is the rich personality it invests in even the most minor of its cast, making an unforgettable experience out of what is mechanically otherwise a strictly traditional RPG



Wonders will confer permanent benefits to the happiness and civilisation rating of your city; they will also be the only buildings that take resources and time to erect. Everything else is bought from your tax-swollen fund of denarii, and will be placed immediately





CivCity: Rome

Firefly and Firaxis ask not what the Romans did for us, but what we can do for them

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **FIREFLY STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK/US**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

It's not often you sit down with a game designer who enthusiastically promises to deliver the "humdrum of daily life" in his work. But there's method to the apparent madness of **Simon Bradbury**, lead designer at Firefly, the UK bricks-and-mortar specialist entrusted with this city-building extension of Firaxis' strategy series, *Civilization*. *CivCity* is the microcosm to *Civilzation*'s world- and era-spanning macrocosm: a game that gets more detailed the closer you look at it, rather than less. There's always been a simple schoolboy fascination to the mundane details of life 2,000 years ago, and Firefly aims to exploit it with meticulously animated scenes of Roman routine that recall Will Wright as much as Sid Meier, and *The Sims* as much as *SimCity*.

In truth, though, *CivCity: Rome* owes its inspiration to none of these socio-gaming classics. Before becoming Firefly in 1999 and creating the castle-building *Stronghold* games, Bradbury and his colleagues worked at Impressions on the *Caesar* series of Roman city builders (which, in an ironic rivalry, Vivendi is resurrecting this year). *CivCity* began with a desire to return to those roots; the collaboration with Firaxis followed, a happy synergy borne of both developers' relationship with publisher 2K.

However, as conversation deepened between Baltimore-based Firaxis and Firefly's new Stateside studio in Connecticut, the branding broke through the game's skin. Key features of *Civilization* – wonders, research, the educational Civilopedia, interventions from famous figures of the age – will come into play as you found a series of settlements for the Roman Empire across a campaign mode and a collection of standalone scenarios (some objective-based, some more-or-less free builds). Meanwhile, the simple variables of happiness, productivity, and culture are extrapolated into micro-manageable resource chains that work – and can be watched, in hypnotically dull detail – on the level of individual inhabitants. Where *Civ* is abstracted, *CivCity* is detailed, and vice versa. External events and an Empire Points system suggest "a big game of *Civ* going on all around you" (in the words of Firaxis executive producer **Barry Caudill**), making extraneous demands that might involve simplified trade or "very light, optional" combat, and that might run counter to the economic and social needs of your town.

"The tie-in has helped us to move the city building genre on," says Bradbury. "I played *Caesar III*, which I solely coded and designed, and I had no idea why people were coming to or leaving my city. Things like the key happiness variable from *Civilization* – putting that smiley face up there helps clarify that."

The design is accessible and direct, with strong feedback, but work still needs to be done on *CivCity*'s crude and inflexible interface, and its balancing. At the moment it's all too easy to hit economic brick walls early on, although later on these lulls will present opportunities for research and reorganisation. If the kinks in this Roman road can be straightened, though, it will present a streamlined, yet thorough, journey into the past.



If *Civilization*'s building block is the city, then *CivCity*'s is the house: the meat of the game is in persuading inhabitants to upgrade their hovels to villas (and so pay more tax) by locating the amenities they want – water, olive oil, entertainment, religion – nearby



Buildings like the Colosseum and Circus Maximus will house live spectacles but, special occasions aside, the audience won't be made up of 'real' people: Firefly tried this, and it brought city life to a halt

Though some settlements are constructed on open planes, in other cases the local geography will present city builders with some significant strategic and design challenges. Considerations such as space limitations, the steepness of hillsides and choke-points like river crossings will all threaten the efficiency of your town





Real politics

When computer games develop educational agendas, a natural tension arises between historical realism and good game design, although the prime directive is simple: "It's got to be enjoyable," says Bradbury. "But in certain areas we are striving to make it as realistic as possible. It's certainly a lot more fluid and organic a city builder than we've done in the past." Its naturalism is convincing, but restricted to what made sense within the design; a system of individual wealth was rejected because it was tricky to represent, and ultimately superfluous. Says Caudill: "If you have this really robust economic model that goes down underneath, but you never really interact with it or see it then as Sid always calls it, that's the computer having more fun than the player."

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **KUJU, CODEMASTERS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JUNE 6**

Sensible Soccer

Jon Hare and the Darlings settle on a winning tactic: Don't do anything stupid







Preservation of *Sensible Soccer's* spirit hasn't precluded the introduction of more contemporary features. Though the 16bit versions encouraged editing of teams, the 3D of this new console build can realise more characteristics than just ball skills and coloured blobs of hair

S*ensible Soccer's* departure from gaming's fixtures list, inspired by the own goal of its '*98* performance, has left us with one vision of 'real football' – that shared by EA, Konami and a handful of imitators. As series creator Jon Hare bemoaned last issue, that doesn't so much involve a real game of football as a broadcast, meticulously animated and ridiculously imprecise. But now even the mighty *PES* has taken its eye off the ball, and the fans that line the terraces (those being the counters of high street stores) can sense its fatigue. It's time to try something new, even if that something new is something old.

First impressions are predictably severe. This is 3D, as was employed by the last game (actually 1999's PlayStation version), which was awful. But like *Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins*, the new *Sensible* knows to keep its technology in check, or at least in a form where it serves the design rather than vice versa. The flat shades and ballooned heads aren't a gag so much as an expression of freedom, validated by an opening minute of play that sees dozens of split-second decisions and actions. The vertical playing field, top-down camera (which has been tilted slightly for the sake of a longer viewing distance), precision passing and instinctive left/right aftertouch offer simulation beyond the boundaries of a TV lens, though with a considerable arcade punch behind every kick.

Sensible's wider significance is elusive. Yes, it encourages you to question whether the turf is really greener on the genre's other side, but rather than offer a compelling suggestion of a united way forward, it revels in taking you back. The destination lies nearer the Mega Drive version than the Amiga original, the multi-button control scheme of a joypad interface having inspired a greater change than the surprisingly faithful visual makeover. The analogue aim, which benefits (though you wouldn't think it at a glance) from an arrow indicator at players' feet, joins a belated sprint function in delicately nudging the game of old into modern times. *Sensible*'s still a funny old game, but in the continued absence of a beautiful one, its sensibilities hold their ground.





With animations as crisp as the visuals shown above, Sensible bears none of the speed issues that trouble its modern peers. Forming a join-the-dots puzzle of football tactics, its passing manoeuvres are quick and precise

Micro Machines V4

Fair play gives way to swear play, as Micro Machines brings out the little guns

FORMAT: **DS, PC, PS2, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **SUPERSONIC**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

Tracks are rigged with hazards, from household props to pecking chickens, while power-ups include shockers, mines and a roof-mounted hammer



Few franchises can add an arsenal to their formula without such a move seeming damningly cynical, but Supersonic has already cleared such a worry with its previous *Mashed* games. Apart from that, *Micro Machines*' form hasn't really changed – tiny circuits with tinier vehicles, with up to four racing to reach the top of the screen while scuffling with each other and dodging environmental hazards – but it's been substantially bulked out.

Some 750 vehicles are offered across a variety of classes, and unlocked through the singleplayer mode. With *Micro Machines* remembered for its brilliance as a party game, this may seem a somewhat pointless focus except for its role in multiplayer – cars can be gambled in online races, in what must be the dinkiest pink-slip option to grace a driving game. And its expanded selection of domestic and urban courses takes in wide range of traditional *MM* themes, with circuits based in and around household rooms and pool tables, but also reaching out to a rooftop, chicken coop, sewer and supermarket. Multiplayer offers plenty of tracks too, but indulges the cumbersome, unlock-fuelled habit of requiring players to spend time with a select handful of courses before being able to access the rest.



The PSP and PS2 versions share the same net code, allowing cross-platform contests. Four people can share two PS2 controllers, albeit cosily, as is *MM* tradition

Remaining likeably cheerful (and, hopefully, cheap), rowdy and simple, *V4* doesn't step away from its classic origins too much. But in a culture of hi-def gloss, and an incoming generation of games that would rather be on the catwalk than in the living room, it's a welcome, lo-def return for such a neat and sociable distraction.



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**





For those wondering why a game played almost exclusively from the side is being rendered in 3D, *G'n'G* has immediate answers. Imagine the difference Mode 7 made to the Super Nintendo version, then multiply it by the number of lives you're sure to lose while marvelling at these spellbinding effects

Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins

The return of Professor F's Arthurian legend offers little cause to be grave

Much like *R-Type Final*, *Ultimate Ghosts 'n' Goblins* won't attract its players: it'll summon them. If that comes across as an uncommonly bold testament, then here's another. Its design, as evolved from its *Ghouls 'n' Ghosts* generation as that was from its first, is a statement of authority over the seductively powerful PSP. Yes, the hardware's strengths are being fully exploited by Fujiwara's gothic caper, but the spirit of the series' early design has dictated the terms of its resurrection. Side-scrolling, unyielding and characteristically berserk, it isn't a mimic of *Final*'s sobering swansong but a valorous trumpet call.

And valour is what this kind of reprise demands, because after such a long absence and the mixed fortunes of *Maximo*, striking a faithful but emboldened tone is difficult business. The smallest changes can break an intricate machine, and some considerable ones emerge in *Ultimate*'s first stage alone. *Ghouls 'n' Ghosts*' transition from vanilla to *Super* form suggested a power-up system itching to explode, and with this episode it finally has. The inventory screen that a shoulder button press provides is an arsenal of shields and spells, the former offering protection and movement bonuses, the latter a bevy of screen-burning smart bombs. As immediately familiar as the game is, in fact, little of it has dodged the surgeon's knife.

Fujiwara and his largely reassembled team have justified every change so precisely as to make good that analogy. Arthur's new ledge grab, for instance, doesn't reflect a taming of his ordeal but a rearrangement – some ledges are simply far enough apart to require it. Likewise, the ability to fly freely upon one particular shield is essential for plundering the new vertically-orientated hidden areas, and advantageous when dodging more furtive enemy attacks. Despite its new difficulty settings, increased life count and generous continue system, *Ultimate* is no patsy. Bad weapon selection can still cripple you, as can metamorphosis at the hands of that accursed wizard. Based on the opening levels, it feels as deliciously cruel as ever: the platformer de Sade, it would seem, is back.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **FREEZE INTERACTIVE**
ORIGIN: **SWITZERLAND**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

Field Ops

A battle of wits between terrorists and counter-terrorists is its least interesting clash

Recognition of squandered potential may have encouraged a change of perspective in the modern RTS, but Swiss studio Freeze will tell you that a change of identity is what's actually required. Flicking between table-top and firstperson views in the developer's upcoming *Field Ops* is no mere trick of the camera, but rather a decided leap between one genre and another. As much *Commandos* as it is *Ghost Recon*, it's a chimera that's remarkable not so much for its marquee feature as for the thought with which it's being introduced.

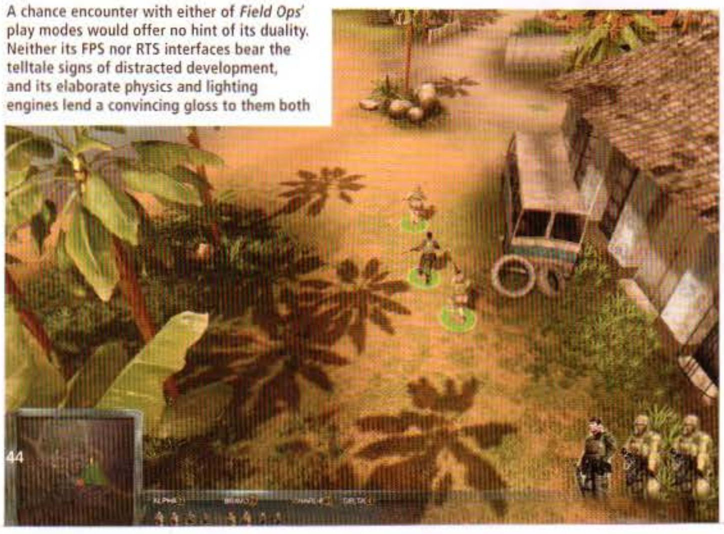
Few of the component pieces are new. The singleplayer campaign merrily pulls together industrious secret service agents, impassive special-ops teams, ethnic caricatures and objects that explode at little more than a touch. Labyrinths of freight-laden pallets and sandblasted terrain typify its battlegrounds, and further familiarities include depth-blurred sniper scopes, real-world physics and reticule-directed team commands. But when the time comes for the button to be pressed, the switch from ethereal strategist to active participant is a refreshing jolt that's actively endorsed by alternately sinuous and expansive geography. What remains to be seen is how well *Field Ops* facilitates the more arcane tactics that its players might devise.

And that's a question that's as open-ended as the game's potential. Will the allied AI, for instance, reliably spring an ambush should you zip into the body of a lone soldier and shepherd the opposition towards them? Will the levels provide enough verticality for you to dash off and assume a sniping position while they lay down suppressing fire? If that bar of spontaneity can be met, then will the enemy AI raise it further by confounding your potentially repetitive tactics? Though it's too early to judge, there's too little that's immediately wrong with the game to suggest that such things are impossible. Its multiplayer, furthermore, is benefiting from a majority share of development time that's already yielded a fun suite of genre-splicing modes. For those shell-shocked by the tank-rush and deathmatch, *Field Ops* may soon offer a rousing call to arms.



Will *Field Ops* justify its claim of looking like *Battlefield 2*? Not really, no. Although it's too early to say for certain, the flair of DICE's game is missing from Freeze's design

A chance encounter with either of *Field Ops*' play modes would offer no hint of its duality. Neither its FPS nor RTS interfaces bear the telltale signs of distracted development, and its elaborate physics and lighting engines lend a convincing gloss to them both





FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Power Stone Collection

Capcom welcomes PSP to the Power Stone world, but can the jewel of Dreamcast be compressed?

Though many a classic game earns due attention through a hook, given time even the best find themselves in need of something else – an excuse. Whether it's an emulator release, backwardly-compatible console or just a chance visit to a retentive arcade, it takes a modern twist of fate to give a game like *Power Stone* another dance. And it deserves the limelight. What a hook, after all: to be one of the only fighters to truly exploit the opportunities of 3D, doing so across exquisitely designed stages and atop a balanced set of rules.



The steady framerate of this Dreamcast conversion, not once dipping during the levels we played, is a good omen for future attempts. The list of ideal candidates isn't short

The modern impetus behind this particular revival isn't so much the PSP's processing power as another of its assets: the ability to join four people in wireless conflict. It's true that *Collection* is just about as no-frills a package as you might have predicted, the textures of its two incorporated Dreamcast titles receiving no secondary licks of paint to bring them up to date and looking surprisingly crude considering the original's Naomi-grade veneer. But their vitality, together with the suitability of the platform, are what pulls a nonetheless faithful conversion through. An unfaltering framerate and anti-aliased image keep the action smooth during even the most frantic of moments, and in *Power Stone* there's little else.

But put a four-character game and a 4.3-inch screen together, however, and you know that a conflict of scales will give *Collection* its biggest headache. While a game like *Def Jam: The Takeover* offers constrained arenas which require only a modest zoom, *Power Stone* can crank its camera out to quite a distance, making visibility an issue. It's the original's undisciplined attitude to combat that saves it, precise direction and timing of blows seldom proving a superior tactic to a good flail. And so, for that 75 per cent of the game that favours anarchy over platform precision and exuberance over strategy, *Power Stone* emits an undiminished handheld gleam.



For a game with comparatively low-resolution textures to emerge on PSP in stretched widescreen is disappointing, not to mention unsightly. The quality of its artwork is enough to see it through, but we'd love to see the problem rectified



The defining multiplayer action of both *Power Stone* titles is a perfect fit for a wifi-enabled portable, especially in coop

Osawari Tantei: Ozawa Rina

BeeWorks' touching story of a touching detective hopes to hit home in all the Wright places

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **SUCCESS**
DEVELOPER: **BEEWORKS**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**



***Osawari Tantei's* solution for the frequently troublesome second screen is a commendably clever one: though it's used exclusively for Rina's portrait, it also shows her inner thoughts and private reactions to the dialogue**

The experimental promise of the DS has challenged developers across the board to come up with any number of innovative ways to utilise its functions, but the obvious and to date most under-utilised answer has been right under everyone's nose. It took a homebrew SCUMMVM to correctly expose the wealth of possibilities, but instead the DS has delivered a more obscure response to the point'n'click with *Osawari Tantei* ('*Touching Detective*'). In it, young detective Rina Ozawa is tasked with solving four different criminal investigations and an assortment of mini-quests with the aid of her stylus-based probing.

If developer BeeWorks is an unfamiliar name to adventure fans, it's no wonder – until now its output has been limited to a few underachieving action and puzzle games like *Guru Guru Nagetto*, and that lack of experience shines through in *Osawari*. Though benefited by its cheerily ghastly modern-Victorian atmosphere, initial play reveals an adventure long on charm – thanks to the eagle-eyes and utterly vacant gaze of its starlet and her anthropomorphic mushroom pet – but far longer on a torrent of badly-paced back-and-forth unskippable dialogue, and shortest where it counts the most: an interface that feels truly reactive to your touch, ingenious puzzles and telling a truly engaging story.

There are no signs yet of localisation efforts underway aside from, unusually, an English summary on the game's website, but it's not unthinkable that the game could receive a sparkling script that takes advantage of its endearing gloominess.



Players can use the touchscreen to more closely inspect and manipulate items collected, though not to the same exten as DS adventures such as *Phoenix Wrigh*



The game's cuteness trumps its gothic undertones every time: your first case sees you in a park with rollerskating rink and hot dog stand, complete with ghoulish vendor





GANGSTER NO.1

TAKING BOTH THE FIRST SHOT AND STAB AT NINTENDO'S REVOLUTION DEMANDS A VERY STEADY HAND. CAN UBISOFT'S RED STEEL CUT IT?









Though the DS was on a roll and its software library swelling, one question continued to be asked of modern Nintendo. What would its stable of heroes be worth in home gaming's most competitive, technology-led generation? The answer was typically clever, typically unique: create technology that has no competition, and create a new hero in the players themselves. So muted was the importance of what Revolution would send to the screen that its TGS debut offered no target movies, or indeed game footage of any kind. Industry practice was literally turned around with a promo that focused purely on the action in front of the television, where the freehand controller would free the hands, and indeed the bodies, of its audience. Or so its inventors said.

Consolidating one revolution with another, the first of the machine's titles made public isn't even firstparty, but is instead Ubisoft's *Red Steel*, a cinematic clash of bullets and blades, east and west. It falls upon this firstperson actioner, developed by a miscellany of worldwide talent housed in the publisher's Paris studio and headed by the men who made *XIII*, to rule out one clash that Nintendo wouldn't want advertised – that of promise and reality.

"Nintendo called a meeting in early 2005," begins producer **Damien Moret**, "where they gave the idea [of Revolution] to our editorial director. We had no paperwork at all, not even a picture. Part of the team then went to Japan, where we were shown a hardware mock-up and a few demos. Even then we didn't know precisely how it would work. The information regarding hardware power would come later, by mail.

TITLE: **RED STEEL**
FORMAT: **REVOLUTION**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **TBA**



CUTBACKS

Red Steel can't shed light on Revolution's visual horsepower just yet. In line with Nintendo's interface-first philosophy, the team only received its devkit a week prior to our arrival. Until then, development occurred on PC to an estimated technical standard that, from what we've been shown, stands halfway between those of GameCube and Xbox. We ask Moret if a machine with limited physics calculation abilities causes problems when dealing with physical interactions. "When we began working on *XIII*," he recalls, "you were just shooting puppets and there was no interaction with anything else, giving the genre an artificial feeling. As time went by, we started implementing other forms of interaction. Physics is one of them, but not the only one. When you shoot something with physics properties, naturally it falls. But there are other ways to achieve the same effect."

"We were really interested in how Nintendo wanted to change the market and do something different, so we said: 'Look, if you want this console to work then we need to work together to make great, exquisite games.' Their approach was that the important information was the idea of the controller, and not the detail of what was inside the box. We were to think about the interaction first, and only afterwards would we talk technology. The only thing we agreed upon in the beginning was to do a firstperson game, and once Mr Miyamoto and Mr Iwata had shown us the prototype hardware in August 2005, we organised our team into two departments: one for design, always thinking of new ways to play, and the other for engineering. When the first controller arrived, it soon became a game of ping-pong between the two teams as we tried to find the right balance."

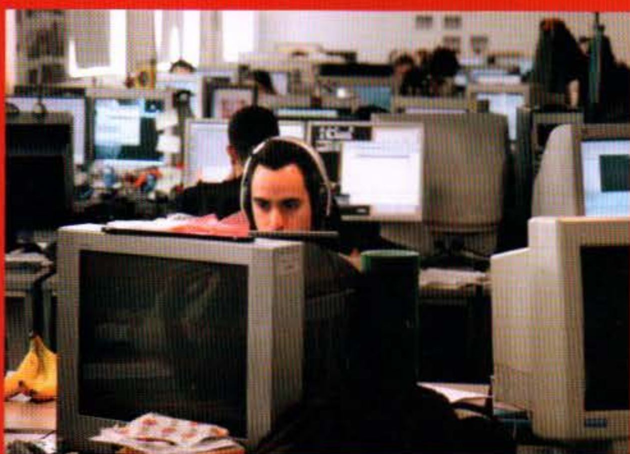
We're handed many inspirations – Robert Whiting's true crime novel Tokyo Underworld, for instance, together with photography portfolios, restaurant guides and a scrapboard of related movie stills (Black Rain, Old Boy, Sonatine, etc) – but *Red Steel* has an obvious, efficient premise. Casting you as a hot-headed American, flung by an oath of vengeance from the streets of LA into life as a Yakuza clansman and ambitious gaijin, its logic is easily deduced. The theme, after all, is familiar to Nintendo's widening audience, can support myriad references to existing action media and, importantly, the practices of sword- and gunplay. But wasn't the manufacturer perturbed somewhat by this ruthless, adult demeanour?

"One FPS tradition we wanted to avoid with this," attests Moret, "beyond the standard military environments, was gore. You could say that James Bond had an adult theme, but it never relies upon gore or gloom, it's simply entertaining. We explained to Nintendo what we had in mind, and some of them had reservations. But we expressed to them that in the US, for example, this would be a Teen game. So it's not violent in the way that most games understand the term. There won't be any blood or heart-stabbing."

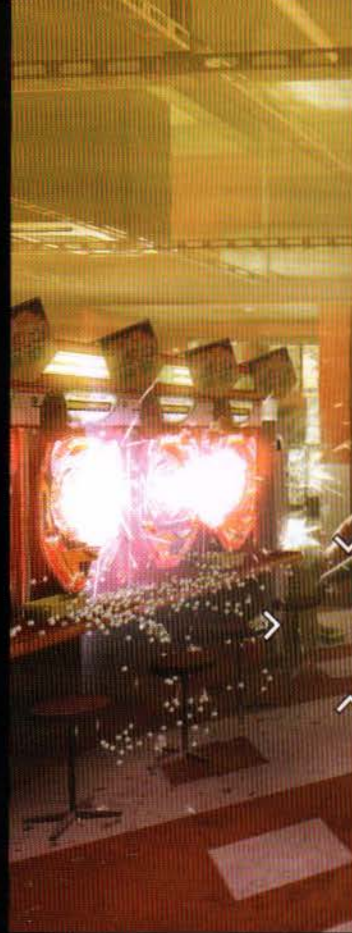
Its core differential, we're told, will be that which separates Yakuza from other organised criminals: honour in combat. "Generally, when you play an FPS you're rewarded for your targeting – a







The Paris team, like many assembled to develop Ubisoft titles, has been pulled in from the company's global studio network. In the same office, *GR:AW* is receiving additional content





Its looks are similar, but Ubisoft doesn't intend for *Red Steel* to wholly fit the mould of an Xbox or GC FPS. Beyond the freehand controls, the game hopes to distinguish itself with cunning AI

headshot, for example. Samurai, however, kill because they have to. When they fight someone, they make a distinction between fighting and killing because there are other ways of neutralising someone. You can just show that you're stronger than them. In Japan, people recognise when they're beaten." So one-on-one katana fights in *Red Steel* might end with you holding the blade to your opponent's neck without actually slicing through, and non-lethal gunplay will reward you by boosting a 'free-shot gauge', a *FEAR*-style bullet-time that freezes rather than slows.

We ask what the team considers to be the requirements of Revolution development and how they relate here. "We knew we'd have to shoot, but that we'd also need something else to differentiate ourselves from the PS2 ports that we'll surely see on Revolution. If you're adapting a genre, you have to figure out how the controller can drastically change it, by which I mean all of its controls. You have to consider everything all over again. So we asked questions of how we could do that, such as by separating the aim and the camera. Most games wouldn't think to, and as a result you'd have a camera that shook with the player's hand."

He has a point, albeit one that's been touched upon before by the game developed (in part) in the office downstairs. *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* devised a similar solution when bringing together camera control and fine aim, allowing free movement of the reticule in the centre of the frame but giving it command of the camera when pushed to the edges. As the similarity suggests, *Red Steel*'s biggest challenge will be to uphold Nintendo's mantra of differentiation despite its generic roots. As we're treated to a lengthy

"ONE FPS TRADITION WE WANTED TO AVOID WAS GORE. YOU COULD SAY JAMES BOND HAD AN ADULT THEME, BUT IT NEVER RELIES UPON GORE, IT'S SIMPLY ENTERTAINING"





Damien Moret has been handed an atypical assignment in *Red Steel*, his own history at Ubisoft incorporating the likes of *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Rayman 3: Hoodlum Havoc*, *XIII* and *Largo Winch: Empire Under Threat*. While that background of heavily characterised IP will no doubt aid understanding of Nintendo's Revolution mandates, it's difficult to ascertain how much of its spirit can be brought to a real-world FPS with only minimal artistic licence

Can a modern FPS really stand up without real-world physics objects? Plenty of debris flies in *Red Steel*, but at present the illusion of destructibility appears considerably weakened



hands-on through one of the game's test beds – a sequence of alleyways and interiors strewn with obstacles and pop-up targets (at this time there's demonstrable code for a pistol, but no swords) – that challenge looms ever larger.

"For the first time," declares Moret, "you'll have a hand on screen and you will see your own, like a mirror or a twin. You really have the feeling that the tool you have in the game is also in your hand. When we started playing [his arms move in grand sweeping gestures] like this, however, we realised that you weren't very precise. Then, one day, one of our lazier designers sat down with a chair and started playing [the gestures shrink to flicks of the wrist] like that, and he was far more efficient. We discovered that we were used to the ancient push-button controllers [and, yes, he does mean the type you've probably used within the last 24 hours] which were all about timing. Now that we were using our movements, it became about self-control. People have to learn that and become conscious of it."

There's a minefield of issues there which, it must be said, the *Red Steel* demo does little to defuse. The notions of the mirrored hand and actually holding your in-game weapon, for instance, are contradictory. Not to pass lasting judgement on incomplete technology, but the freehand controller we have here is no gun substitute. There's no invisible line running from the end of the controller to the TV, like a laser pointer. Instead, a crosshair on the screen moves relative to the angle of the controller: to aim at the top of the screen you'll likely be pointing at the ceiling. Indeed, Moret believes that a crosshair requirement may well be put in place by Nintendo because without it you cannot aim. Furthermore, without the application of its z-axis controls (which swordplay will bring to 25 per cent of the game) the freehand controller is little more than an airborne mouse. We try out various poses in order to test the control scheme's versatility, but in doing so find ourselves acutely aware that our more natural movements are being translated rather than reflected.

Then there's the concept of 'lazy', a playing style that sits awkwardly between the traditions of this and conventional hardware. Playing *Red Steel* as it's really meant to be played, sat with the

"FOR THE FIRST TIME, YOU'LL HAVE A HAND ON SCREEN LIKE A MIRROR OR A TWIN. YOU REALLY HAVE THE FEELING THAT THE TOOL YOU HAVE IN THE GAME IS IN YOUR HAND"













Ubisoft is hoping that 'the other side' of Japanese culture and architecture will set *Red Steel* apart from other portrayals





The fashionable angling of your pistol is something you can, if you wish, replicate with the freehand controller, but the hand position involved in doing so is a rather awkward one





SPLICE AND DICE

Having turned half of its team into a Revolution thinktank with less than two years of total development time to play with, has Ubisoft Paris left itself free to create the generic nuts and bolts of a modern game? Moret is assured, but heedful: "For art direction, yes. Storytelling, however, is a job that's changed tremendously over the last few years. Five years ago, a writer just wrote the dialogue we requested. But now we make sure that they work with the level designers, and here we've even hired a director just for special interaction moments. April will be the month we merge everything together on to the common toolset – the Revolution development kit. But yes, we have all the pieces in place."

controller on one leg, the wrist flicking it about a small window of movement, can feel restrictive and yet, after time, physically sapping. In this sense it stands to represent the worst of both aforementioned worlds, and validates concerns that skulked in the background of TGS. How people will respond to what, for many, will be their first point of contact with Revolution is hard to estimate. There's unquestionable intuitiveness to the control scheme and gunning down targets in full stride is gratifying, but the nervously wavering reticule makes long-range accuracy problematic (and caffeine ill-advised). Perhaps, for an audience of emancipated non-gamers yet to experience the rigorous twiddling of thumbs, the experience might prove less physically disagreeable and less jarring overall.

The contrary overall nature of this discovery, however, is clear. Foremost in Nintendo's showcasing of Revolution, and indeed in the weaving and bobbing of *Red Steel*'s live-action trailer, is freedom – the very opposite of the self-control promoted here. The party line thus far has been of unfettered abandon, the liberation of both wireless technology and the player that holds it. But in this example, and surely in those of thirdparty games to come, reality falls short. As Moret has observed, the freehand controller requires delicacy instead of drama, a complicating factor being that by calibrating your software to favour grander movements, you create a game that's either exploitable by 'the lazy player' or too tiring to be played at length. Either way, there are implications of novelty – a poisonous word to apply to the alluded future of gaming.

But note that this reflects more on *Red Steel* than the Revolution. Like its stylus, Nintendo's wand possesses a magic that few beyond its cadre of internal developers will immediately know how to wield, and together with its conjoined analogue twin it continues undeniably to hum with potential at a touch. That pebble-sized partner, bearing nothing more than a stick and two vertically aligned shoulder buttons, is a truly transparent interface: you clasp it in your hand and it disappears, in this case offering you effortless run, strafe, jump and crouch controls. Meanwhile, the freehand controller remains startlingly precise. We'd say unerringly so, but proximity to the screen and ambient light conditions both caused disconcerting hiccups under test. Again, the prototype nature of the hardware leaves us in no position to play doomsayer.

Really, that's a courtesy also deserved by a game that still has until Revolution's launch to refine its controls and, through promised excellence of AI and the more auspicious introduction of its swords and honour systems, prove itself a decent actioner. *Red Steel* mightn't carry the Revolution message with as much clarity and weight as you'd expect, making this pre-E3 demo something of an enigma in itself, but at the very least there's evidence that the message is being understood.



THE PANIC IN CENTRAL PARK

Not content with a next-gen reinvention of Test Drive, Eden chases Alone In The Dark out of the corridors and into the wild

If there's an element that videogame shockers have shared since the original *Alone In The Dark*, it's being up-front with their themes. That game's fraught atmosphere came from possible sudden death seconds into the game, *Silent Hill 2* couched its isolation in what seems an eternity of inaction, and *Resident Evil 4* roused an entire village to the hunt. For its part, the new *Alone* makes good on its design intent to 'break the rules of survival horror' by demolishing a Fifth Avenue apartment block from the inside out. Corridors splinter, ceilings collapse and outer walls plummet into a wan New York sunset: then, with a death rattle of buckling girders, your entire surroundings tear free. After a finger-clawing reprieve from the plummet to street level, you're left to scramble across ledges and swing from dangling cables as the burning structure collapses around you. It's quite a climax to an opening section, we remark, to which director **David Nadal** and producer **Nour Polloni** exchange knowing grins. "That's not the climax," Polloni says.

Taking place over one catastrophic night in present-day Central Park, from explosive sundown to exhausted dawn, Eden intends to write a new mythology for that man-made wilderness, rather than continue the series' tour of traditional American haunting grounds. "We want to tell a believable story," says Nadal, "to make it seem credible that all along we've been lied to about what's beneath the park." Polloni adds that similar care has been taken to make the supernatural themes seem plausible: "We deal with the afterlife, but we're not just picking it out of the air – we reference various religious and cultural beliefs, and near-death experiences, using these elements to make you think: 'Maybe that could be out there'." It's something the game's hero will certainly be thinking, as he's the very same Edward Carnby from the original game – despite looking less dapper, and indeed less desiccated than the long years since 1929 would suggest.





The physics showcase of the apartment block's protracted demise isn't just for show: once Carnby snares a cable, he can build momentum to swing on it, hold steady to scale or abseil with it, or use his weight to pull more of it free from the masonry



TRY, TRY AGAIN

Nadal reveals that the problems of *Kya*, Eden's previous game, were compounded by an early identity crisis: "It started out as a Harry Potter game, then when EA got the licence we had to change the lead character to a witch, then when Harry Potter became so huge we realised it couldn't compete, so we'd need something new again... that's not a sane way to make a game. You have to start with a clear vision of what your game will be, and if the publisher isn't in total agreement you kill the project and make something else. It's not a question of 'publishers are bad and developers are good', but that both need to be committed to the same focus." The experience has shaped Eden's approach to development as a whole: "With *Test Drive Unlimited* and *Alone* we would present concepts every month to convince Atari that they were great, and if they didn't agree then we would rewrite them – it was the fifth iteration of *TDU* that introduced the online aspect, and the eighth version of *Alone* when we came up with 'break the rules'."



Damage textures for NPCs, and Carnby himself, put normal mapping to grisly effect, glistening wetly and even self-shadowing under light. For Carnby, it's the only indication of his wellbeing

"I see this as a continuation of the first game: it had to be set in our time, in an identifiable location, so the player can feel a sense of connection, but it could be *Alone 2*," explains Nadal, and we wonder if that treatment might ease the ill-feeling between disenfranchised series creator Frederick Raynal and its publisher. "The bad blood is a shame, but he's a good friend of mine, and over the years we've exchanged a lot of philosophies on game design. We have some of the first *Alone*'s spirit: to me, the first game was the revolutionary one, and we want to break from the sequels and show what *AITD* should be."

Nadal shrugs off Uwe Boll's barely filmic interpretation – "I haven't seen it, only the trailer and the critics [laughs]. I think people don't really know about the movie: I know no one that saw it at the theatre" – and states that if they owe anything to cinema, it's from a more accomplished source: "If I had to pick one movie, it would be Die Hard. We analysed it frame-by-frame – it's the perfect survival story, even though there's no supernatural elements." However, the team have looked to an entirely different medium to present the title, choosing instead the metered thrills of American TV serials. *Alone*'s 'season' consists of episodes with around 45 minutes of content, each self-contained, but providing insight into the overall story arc. "The movie structure can work with action games," says Polloni, "but we felt it didn't suit an adventure game – a movie is two to three hours long, and when games are two or three times that, you lose the intensity of the narrative." The episodic formula is intended to make each section of the game satisfying in itself, rather than a race through lulls to the next plot point: regular cliffhangers will supply the drive to continue, accompanied by a 'next episode' teaser if the player leaves the game (and a 'previously' recap when they rejoin it). "We're all fans of 24, CSI, Lost and Prison Break – and we were making games without thinking to ask: 'Why are we crazy about these shows? Why are they so successful?'" Nadal says of the decision. "It's a great framework for our levels, to ensure each episode gives the player a definite start and end, with a twist, a revelation and a climax." Keeping to their own rules has created the occasional run-on storyline, though: "We split the first episode into two because we wanted so many things to happen," he laughs.

The rhythm of play will vary across episodes and through locations in the park's vast grounds and buildings, but Polloni describes an overall theme of "a real survival experience, using everything at hand to survive at all costs – not in terms of struggling through constant fighting, but to make the player feel like they're living through something extraordinary." To support that mentality, *Alone* uses a control





scheme that seems like the logical extension of *Dead Rising*'s wall-to-wall object selection and *Fahrenheit*'s analogue manipulation. Using the right analogue stick, objects can be raised as shields, viciously swung or lobbed overhead with a sense of desperate purpose that a button-press could never convey. "You can do practically all the damage you can imagine with an object, anything you could logically use it for, instead of just picking it up and pressing 'use'," says Polloni, demonstrating a fire extinguisher's effectiveness at stoving in doors.

An extinguisher's intended use looks to be just as important, though, as fire will play as important a role in the game as darkness. The dynamics of spreading blazes and disintegrating materials have been carefully recreated, both for dramatic effect and to allow players an instinctual sense of how quickly their surroundings can be consumed. It's possible, and at some points may be necessary, for players to indulge in arson of their own, but at the cost of it being a devil's bargain – *Alone*'s infernos could be more menacing than its supernatural threats. To Nadal, moving beyond the game's creatures as a source of fear is an inevitable

"IT MAY DISGUST YOU, IT MAY EVEN SCARE YOU, BUT AFTER THAT THE FEAR IS OVER. AFTER THAT, IT'S ACTION"

development: "The first time you see this monster," he gestures to a wall of concept art, perhaps indicating a gaunt figure that's all knotted sinew and carving knife-fingers, or a stumbling corpse gutted and sutured in one body-length incision, "it may disgust you, it may even scare you – but after that it's just there, and the fear is over. After that it's action."

It's more action, and interaction, than the genre has ever seen, comfortably vaulting *Resident Evil 4* – a title that Polloni and Nadal feel has marked survival horror's only significant evolution – even in *Alone*'s most heavily scripted sections. What might have been expected to be interactive cutscenes in the calamitous opening instead blend player control and physics reaction, a standard Eden intends to maintain through to the season's final reveal. "The problem with survival horror has been that you can't jump, you can't use physics, you have very limited interaction with the world – OK, so maybe that



Vehicles are more than just set-dressing for the underpasses. A fire propogation system demo shows a car being burnt out, so players can certainly wreck vehicles; it's all but assured you'll also be able to drive







Described by Polloni as 'a city within a city', Central Park offers more than a chance for Eden to show off its GPS-aided recreation – 'slightly reworked' versions of locations such as Belvedere Castle, the park's police precinct and the Metropolitan Museum of Art will also feature. Our money's on few of them surviving the night

TITLE: **ALONE IN THE DARK: NEAR DEATH INVESTIGATION**
FORMAT: **360, PS3, PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **EDEN GAMES**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **2007**



makes the enemies scarier," says Nadal. "But it's not impossible to make something just as scary without all the frustration." Doesn't such an approach shift the frustration to the designers when their tightly-wound environments have unpredictable physics let loose in them? "Emergent gameplay is a challenge, but the worst thing that can happen is that you'll lay out a puzzle, and some smart guy just takes a truck loaded with fuel, sets it on fire, drives it straight through the monsters and blows up everything

"THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN IS SOME SMART GUY TAKES A TRUCK LOADED WITH FUEL AND BLOWS UP EVERYTHING"

you'd planned for." He shrugs amiably. "But why not? It's his experience, and I always say to the team: 'I want the limit of the simulation of the world to be the player's imagination.' We let the player dig as far as they can, and model the world a little bit beyond that."

It's a comprehensive agenda for a studio best known for its driving games: *Alone*'s core team hail from the first *V-Rally*, but their true testing ground was PS2 action-adventure *Kya: Dark Lineage*. That game's troubled development (see 'Try, try again') and poor reception saw the team face either messy disintegration or a renewed effort to prove themselves, and *Alone* is proof of the latter. "*Kya* was the most helpful tool we have because it failed: we did a huge post-mortem, and know exactly why it was successful in some areas and why it failed in others," Nadal explains. "We lost half of *Kya*'s production implementing mechanics that just didn't work inside the game, and ended up being dropped. With *Alone*, the first thing we did was prototype every idea, just to be sure we wouldn't be wrong again."

Polloni shows us the game's formative shrine: a wall nearly papered over with three years of capsule concepts and storyboards (our eye is caught by BOUM!, CAT, and more ominously SCARIFICATION), like some occult interpretation of *Wario Ware*. "*Alone* gave us the opportunity to propose all the ideas that we really wanted to bring into games," says Polloni. "And over there are the ones that didn't make it – kind of a wall of



On top of some painful flesh wounds and heavier, handicapping injuries, Carnby may be at risk of contracting an even more troubling ailment – one of many closely-guarded shocks



Alone's inventory system is slick and assured (left). A button-press snaps Carnby's view to firstperson as he whips open his jacket, and fixing his gaze on one of the holsters within it removes or stores his current item.





Polloni (left) and Nadal. While *Alone* is Nadal's dream project, he's also responsible for *TDU* and Eden itself, following studio head and founder Stephane Baudet's amicable departure

shame." In truth, the rejected list is more of a clipboard of shame, far outnumbered by the building blocks that will compose the final game.

"The overall concept has been 'break the rules'. Anything that's risky – we have nothing to lose," grins Nadal. "I don't like the idea of 'genre' any more. I think we should be concentrating on the experience. If at the end the player has been scared, then it's a horror; if they liked the action, then it's an action game; if they liked the escape from the building, it's a platformer... it's a melting pot."

There's still much more to be seen, with both developers apologetically avoiding taboo topics such as vehicles, or the presence of at least one more effect-driven mechanic to rival the fires. But with the game still in pre-alpha stages, the fairest approach seems the one that gives horror titles their morbid allure: to anticipate the uncertainty as much as you dread what could go wrong.

Where the first *Alone* would open the doors on a genre, its next-gen incarnation intends to close them again, leaving following titles in the wide-open landscape of undiscovered fears. "If we succeed in what we want to achieve, we can set a trend that's not specific to survival horror," Nadal considers. "When we first started *Kya*, what I had in mind was to have one team working on action-adventure games and one on driving games, because one day I wanted to mix driving and action. This was before *GTA*, by the way [laughs]. So these mixes already exist, but we could be pushing further than that, going out beyond genre labels."

Polloni continues: "Hopefully we'll see other games offering different experiences to 'This is a game like *X*, so you play it just like that because that's how those games are played.'"

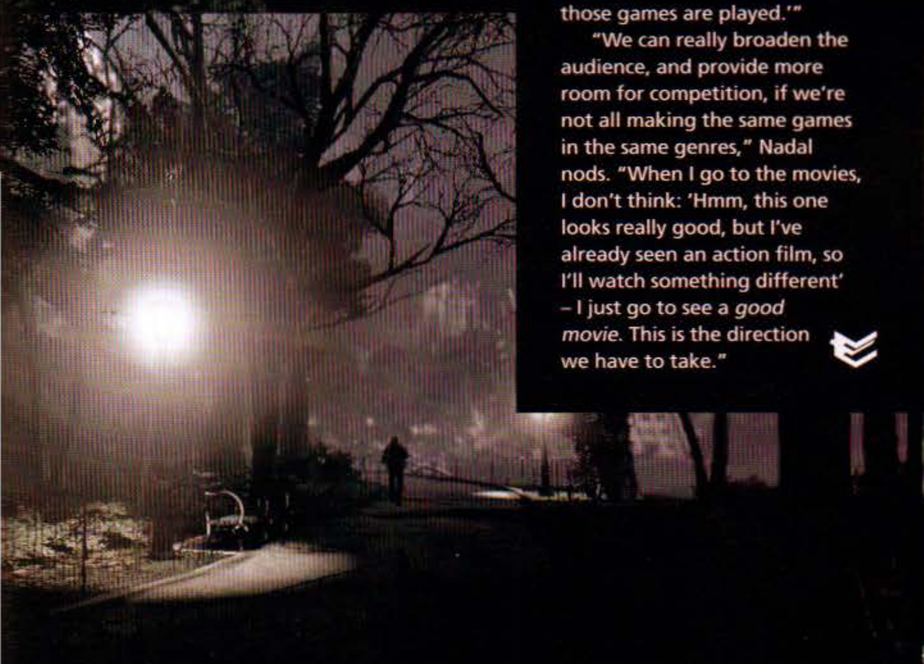
"We can really broaden the audience, and provide more room for competition, if we're not all making the same games in the same genres," Nadal nods. "When I go to the movies, I don't think: 'Hmm, this one looks really good, but I've already seen an action film, so I'll watch something different' – I just go to see a *good movie*. This is the direction we have to take."

A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC

***Alone*'s soundtrack is an original composition by Olivier Deriviere, who Polloni admits the studio is working with as much as it can in expectation of him becoming a scarce commodity once he gains wider notice. Blending synthesised symphonics and choral arrangements, each section is written to order based on the storyboards for a scene. Once delivered – Deriviere works at a terrifyingly prolific pace – sound designer Vincent Le Meur disassembles the piece into separate elements, which he can then seed directly into the level script. The result is that it reacts to the player instead of simply crossfading between elements at prearranged points. Le Meur indicates it's possible for the soundtrack to branch into new arrangements when the player backtracks instead of repeating.**









Making the nocturnal park intensely menacing hasn't required much artistic licence: "We went there after dark – even though that's still quite dangerous – about a year after we started, and it was terrifying. There are some really, really strange people in there at night," recalls Nadal

Heaven

The original next-generation title is approaching its E3



TITLE: **HEAVENLY SWORD**
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEI**
DEVELOPER: **NINJA THEORY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBA**

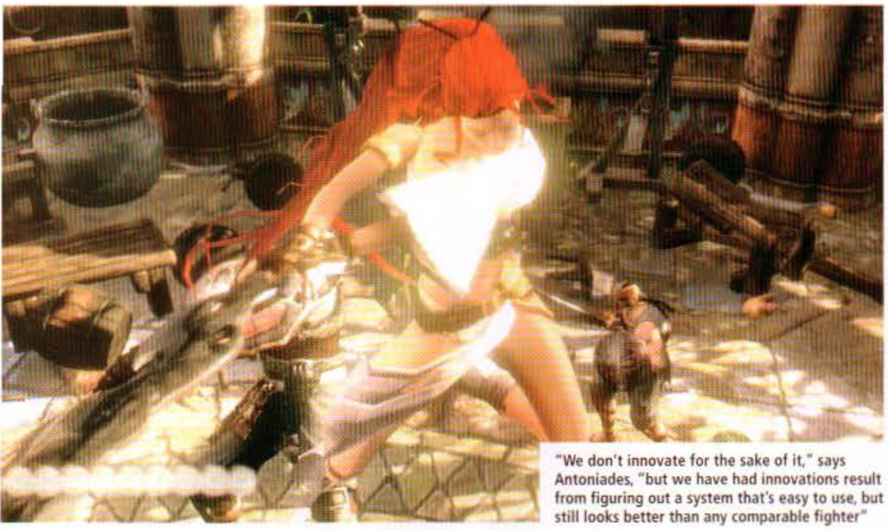


can wait

re-emergence: we talk PlayStation 3 practice with Ninja Theory

Heavenly Sword* has become perhaps too perfect a PS3 flagship title. Like its platform, the complexity of the game's technology has been hinted at over a lengthy period. Like its platform, the game's immense ambition is obvious, but less so the means of its delivery. Conceived as a next-generation title before most next-generation development had begun, it invites impatience: with such an early start, then why – again like its platform – is it making such a late arrival?

Chief designer **Tameem Antoniades**' design diary (**E**143-151, and reprinted on Ninja Theory's website at www.ninjatheory.com) ended on a high note a year ago with Sony's signing and an E3 trailer debut. But rather than building on that momentum, the following publisher-imposed silence has returned the game to



"We don't innovate for the sake of it," says Antoniades, "but we have had innovations result from figuring out a system that's easy to use, but still looks better than any comparable fighter"



Antoniades (left) and Ball. Asked which titles from the last generation have hinted at their hopes for next-gen experiences, Ball suggests *Shadow Of The Colossus* before drawing a blank, and Antoniades settles on *Chronicles Of Riddick*

the not-quite-announced limbo of its earlier days.

Sony has relaxed its intense protectiveness only enough to allow Antoniades and chief technology officer **Mike Ball** to show fragments of footage on a laptop: a routine honed through pitches to Sony, and other jilted suitors including Microsoft, over the game's sheltered life. "Back then, keeping a low profile was appropriate, because we hadn't had whole chunks up and running in a fun way. Now we do, so it's frustrating – but our time will come, and we've got to fall in line with Sony's strategy," says Antoniades. "The problem with telling everyone your combat system is great, or that you've got – this sounds really egotistical – some of the best facial performances in a game ever, just draws scepticism. It smacks of hot air. We don't have a long, illustrious history in gaming, so that response is natural, but the proof will be in the pudding."

If expectations for the first wave of PS3 titles (it's still unclear where *Heavenly Sword* falls within that schedule) are daunting, if largely self-generated, Ninja Theory at least appreciates the attention. The demands of a flagship title, it seems, are preferable to those naturally facing a small independent: "It's a better kind of pressure than putting all you have into a game, but not knowing if you'll get any recognition or reward at the end of it," Antoniades reasons. But after the euphoria of featuring in Sony's E3 keynote faded, how sobering was the way *Killzone* and *MotorStorm*'s footage set a questionably attainable PS3 standard? "It didn't faze us: what we had at last E3 was in-game, it was stuff we were proud of, and I don't think the other footage changed the competitive landscape. We haven't shown target renders, that's what we have now, and what we will have when the game's released will hopefully look significantly better. As far as we're concerned, yeah, that is the standard we need to be at."

"What we had at last E3 was in-game, and I don't think the other footage changed the competitive landscape"

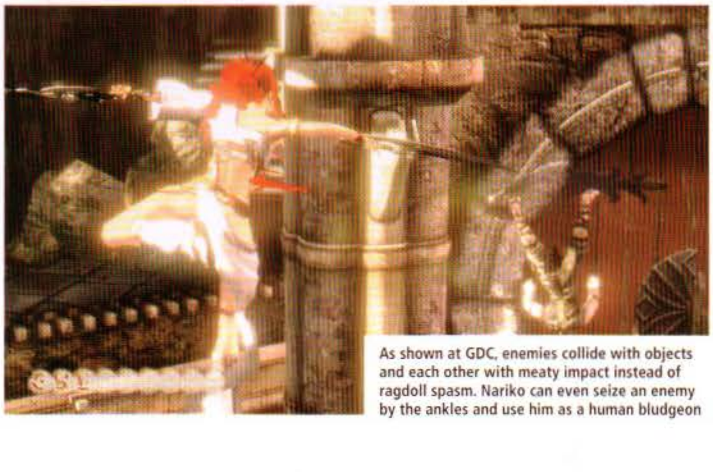
"We've always been quietly confident of what we can produce," adds Ball. "The game, the combat system, the rendering technology have been great for a long time, and it's still evolving – the screenshots from a year ago have aged quite a bit. We started development so early that our concern is keeping that head-start going, rather than needing to catch up with anyone else."



Seeing the environments in-game does much to justify the extravagance of *Heavenly Sword*'s lighting model – a tangible atmospheric effect rather than self-congratulatory tech trickery

As a game that's lived in the eyes of most from show to show and tech demo to tech demo, *Heavenly Sword*'s spectacle has been obvious, but less so its professed emotional side. Ball concurs that conference showmanship favours ragdoll carnage over emotional depth: "It's always been quite difficult for us whenever we're asked to produce a demo, because we're not specifically focusing on technology for technology's sake," he says. "So many factors only really come across when you're playing it, like seeing the facial performance in the game as opposed to a talking head in a tech demo. When you're fighting a group of 30 guys, we've got a system called Chatterbox that lets pairs of soldiers talk to each other – two might be marked as friends, and when one dies the other reacts to that. It's not really in-your-face, but it adds a lot to the game's feeling."

"The problem with emotion in games has been that the technology has been limited," says Antoniades. "If you can't create believable characters, they can't express believable emotion. That, for us, is the biggest difference between next-gen and previous generations." Feeling that such empowerment will allow games to move beyond hands-off cinematics, the team has worked to deliver a highly story-driven game



As shown at GDC, enemies collide with objects and each other with meaty impact instead of ragdoll spasm. Nariko can even seize an enemy by the ankles and use him as a human bludgeon

THE ACCIDENTAL AUTEURIST

As *Heavenly Sword*'s production has ramped up, Antoniades has found design roles to be the most difficult to fill, although he admits it's his criteria more than a lack of applicants: "I see designers as like film directors – learning their craft in all the areas, knowing every aspect of production and how it all fits together. Looking for that in the games industry has been hopeless, because designers, I think, aren't valued in that kind of regard. They usually have no technical or artistic background, they don't know how the production process works... In the 16bit days everyone cut their teeth doing their own games or demos, but now we've got universities trying to fill that gap, and those courses leave a lot to be desired. Getting a candidate saying: 'I think the future of gaming is about blah blah blah which I learned on my course' doesn't help us make a game. There just aren't that many good designers around – I've got a friend at Microsoft who's been looking as well, and in six months he's only hired one."



without an equally heavy reliance on cutscenes. Antoniades hopes to see currently underused, or entirely unexplored, narrative methods become more prominent in next-gen development: "I think we're on the cusp of a new format for adventure games and telling stories in them."

Stirring storytelling aside, the game's lynchpin has always been its combat. Development of the system began almost immediately after 2003's *Kung Fu Chaos*, and by 2004's GDC prototype, Antoniades was claiming to have already eclipsed current title belt-holder *Ninja Gaiden*. What at the time might have been interpreted as a case of videogame hubris now feels more like an assertion: "It's a self-fulfilling prophecy if people are told: 'You can't do a fighting game because you're western, so we won't fund it,'" Antoniades states. "We've done what we're good at, and I think when people play the game, the whole argument about western developers not being able to do thirdperson combat will go away." In that sense, *Heavenly Sword* has found the ideal platform: with the 360 remaining western-led, and the DS's library suggesting that the developer best able to exploit Nintendo's Revolution will be Nintendo, the new PlayStation remains the crossover console – a conduit for the transfer of influences that produces an *Ico*, a *God Of War*, or a *FFXII*. "Internally, Japanese staff have been really surprised by how good the combat looks – and how different it looks from Japanese

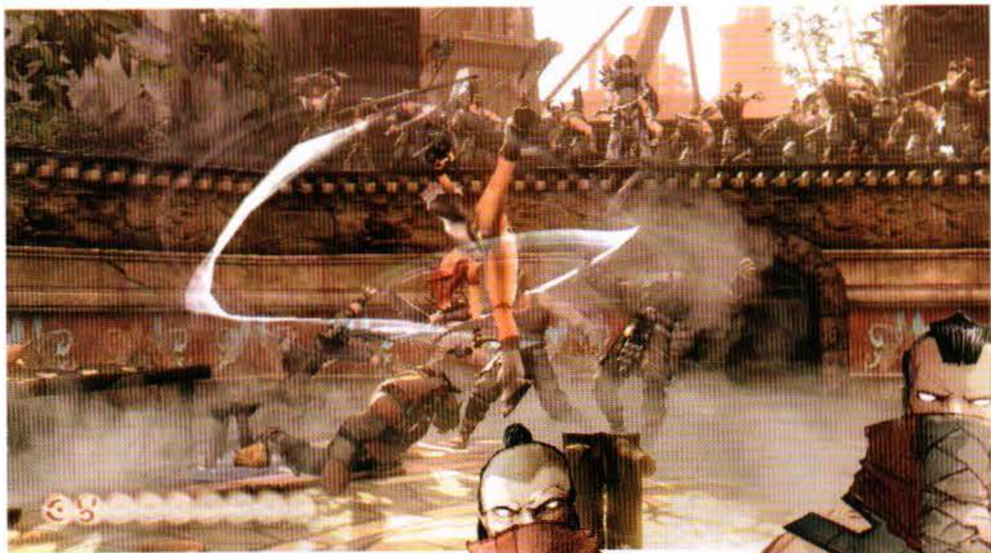




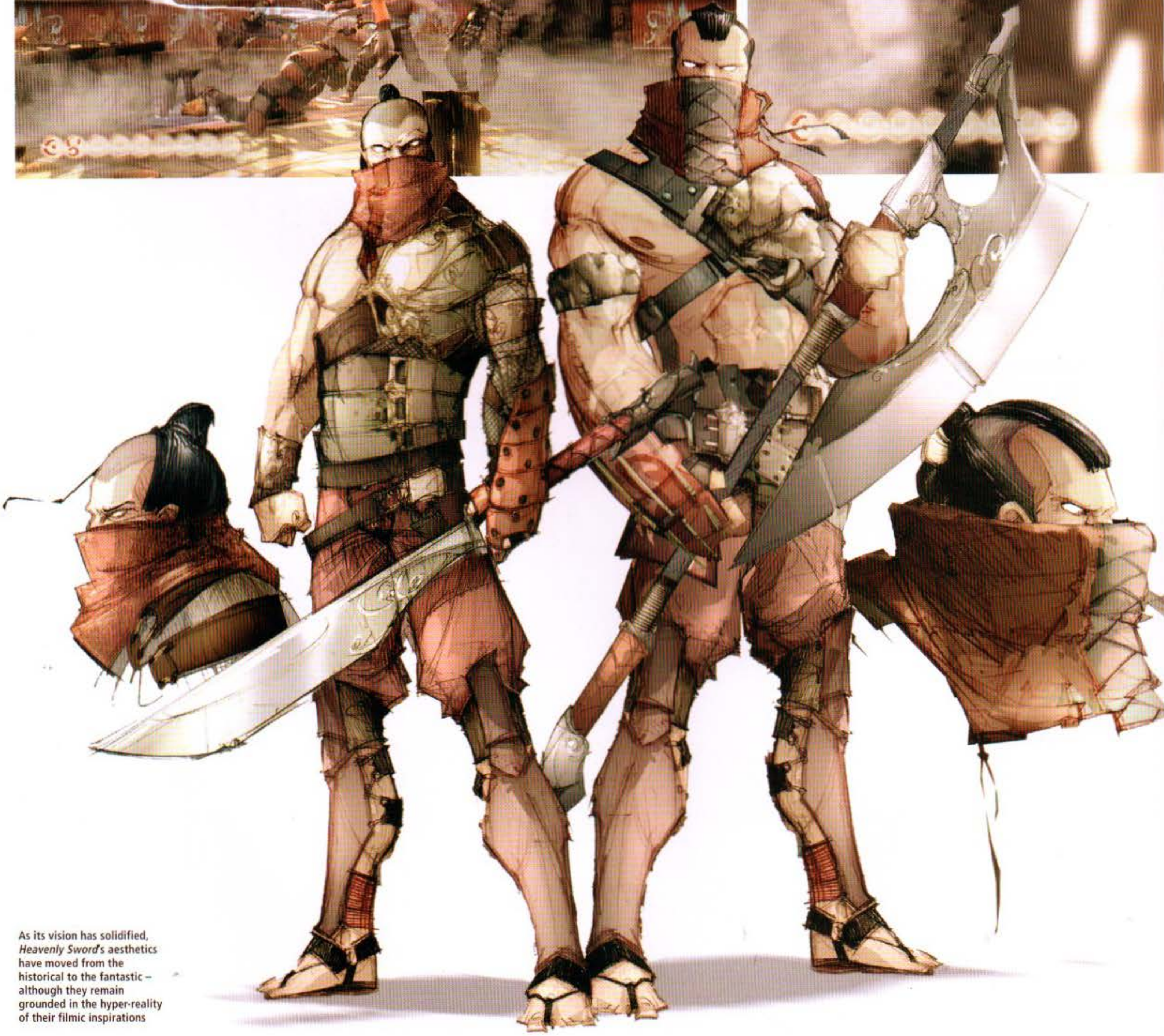




Ninja Theory has invested considerable effort into *Heavenly Sword's* backstory, and indeed The Heavenly Sword's backstory: "[The game] is all about Nariko, but the sword itself has a story that's going to play out through a number of titles – we're thinking really big in terms of the franchise," Ball explains. "Obviously our focus now is on *Heavenly Sword 1*, but there's a big story to be told beyond that"







As its vision has solidified, *Heavenly Sword*'s aesthetics have moved from the historical to the fantastic – although they remain grounded in the hyper-reality of their filmic inspirations



To date, *Bujingai*'s choreographed blade-clashing duels have flown the flag for wire-fu, but *Heavenly Sword* intends to produce the same spectacle with unparalleled interaction

games," continues Antoniades. "[The combat] is its own thing – it's not aping their style."

The team has been accused of worse, *Kung Fu Chaos*' irreverent chop-socky drawing an affronted response from some quarters of the American gaming media. As a small Cambridge developer producing a title so determinedly eastern in imagery and influence – the trailer for the original pitch features Asian-dialect speech with English subtitles – is it an approach that risks seeming presumptuous? "With *KFC* we basically made *Banzai: The Videogame*, and that didn't work in certain parts of conservative middle America. It was a cultural misunderstanding. What we're doing now is not a parody, it's not even set in China – it's a genre, the Wu Shu genre, and that's something we know a lot about. I don't think we need to justify it."

Having successfully signed the game despite scepticism that a 20- to 30-strong team was capable of next-gen development, Ninja Theory has since vindicated that sentiment by growing to a 75-strong studio, and is still aggressively hiring. The project's demands have drawn applicants globally from both film and game industries, with this crossover often requiring a shift in traditional methodology: "It's been a learning experience in every discipline, and you do have to adapt: if you can't adapt, you are *stuck*. There's no way around that now," says Antoniades.

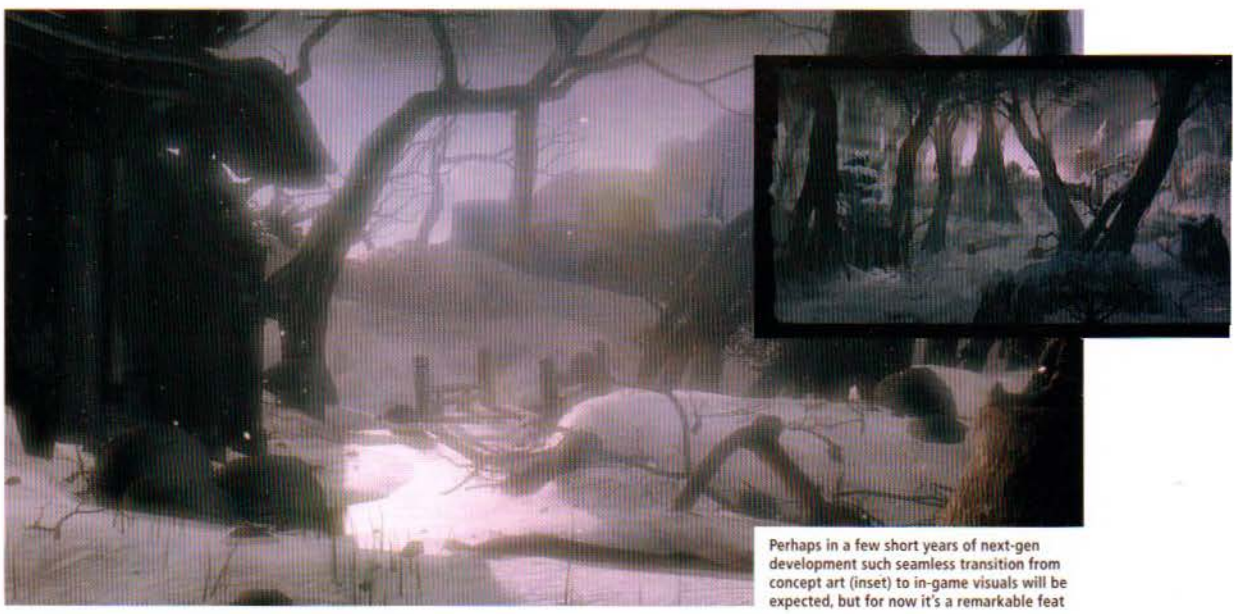
Ball continues: "On the code side, we're looking at advanced rendering techniques and physics solutions that take a really good education to understand the processes involved, but equally we've got a lot of developers that have worked on games for years, and skills they used on the Spectrum – memory handling, writing efficient code and so on – still apply. I think developers who've forgotten the value of those techniques are going to find it hard on the next-gen platforms."

Asked if the pressures of film-quality CG rendering and wrangling the PS3's architecture have found the team pining for Nintendo's more modest production vision, Ball is pragmatic: "This is where developers split into two camps: some are frightened by the new technology, and they'll work on the simpler consoles, mobile games, Xbox Live Arcade games. I think those are seen as a return to 'traditional' gaming values, and there'll be some really nice stuff there – but the other camp are embracing the next generation and saying: 'Let's get on with it.' Each generation change has brought its own challenges – but in retrospect, the changes you actually make are quite simple. I'm sure we'll be sitting around in a couple of years looking back and saying: 'What was *that* [panic] all about?'" he laughs.

"I don't have a nostalgic view of games," says Antoniades, "but in a title like *Heavenly Sword*, there's so many different sub-systems that each one is like developing a smaller game. The combat system is vast in its diversity, but it's formed from elements that were developed independently then brought together. It's an iterative process, and I think next-gen doesn't need to be a monolithic development effort – it *can* be like developing those old games."

And yet to hear Ball describe some of *Heavenly Sword*'s aesthetic features – an outdoor lighting model that renders individual airborne water particles so as to accurately reflect and colour the sky; one of the Cell's processors committed to the movement of heroine Nariko's cascading hair – is a reminder of how quaint the limitations of those previous generations now seem. "Certainly PS3 hardware affords a bit of luxury," Ball agrees. "We had some of the development team saying: 'But we're spending half of this CPU's processing power just on her hair', and we're arguing: 'The hair's a really important part of her character, it's what makes her beautiful, and feminine, and striking...' The SPUs have exceeded our expectations in terms of the power that's available for things like procedural animation and geometry." Beyond his game, Ball sees the possibilities for experimental Cell use driving the evolution of PS3 development: "You can get great results just by moving something on to one of those processors, but the maturity will come from learning how to really use them intelligently, and to think of cool new uses for them – I'd love to get more of that stuff in there, actually," he admits with a guilty

"In a title like Heavenly Sword, there's so many different sub-systems that each one is like developing a smaller game"



Perhaps in a few short years of next-gen development such seamless transition from concept art (inset) to in-game visuals will be expected, but for now it's a remarkable feat



FUNDS, ANYONE?

From its initial more obvious Wu Shu homage to its current stylised look, *Heavenly Sword* has always been a title that demands lavish production values, an aspect Sony's clout has provided. "Sony let us go into full development with the original plans, everything that we ever dreamed of, really – it's a case of: 'Let's do it!', and then: 'OK [deep breath], so I guess we've actually got to do that now.'" Ball says. After blue-skying the idea of having the Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon sound effects production team on board, the arrangements were made to lend their imposing armoury/foley set to the game's audio. "If we need a sound effect for a table being smashed, then they'll get a wooden table and actually split it," laughs Antoniades.



The greatest test facing *Heavenly Sword*'s combat system – well, at least the one at the head of the queue – will be its adaptability over both tight environments and battlefield combat

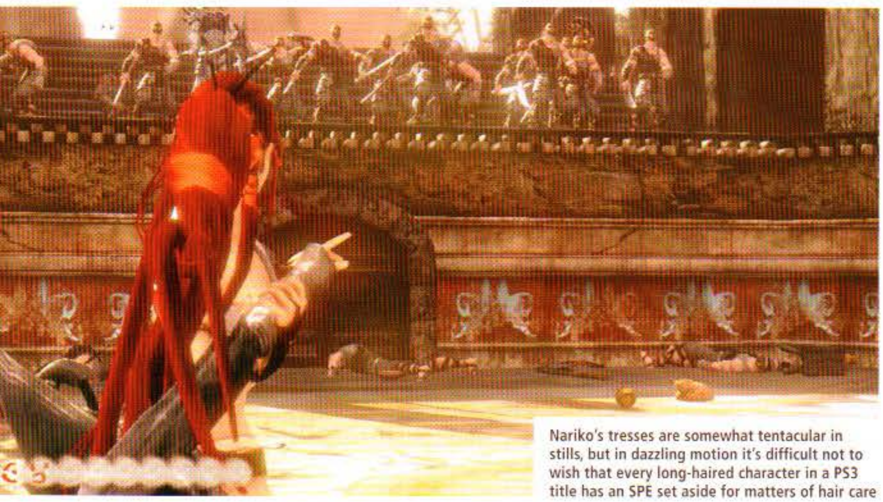
grin, "we were talking on the train up here about some more things we could do if we have the development time left…"

So is even a game that sets its sights above the current highest bar for gameplay, presentation and production values not immune to feature creep? "We've stayed pretty true to our vision for focusing on several points of quality – we've never said we're going to make the biggest game in the world," Antoniades defends. "But there's always some element of feature creep," says Ball, "of implementing something then looking at how we could better implement it, and always asking: 'Is this next-gen worthy yet?'" That question, which the team has considered to an almost paranoiac degree over the game's development, suggests that Ninja Theory's issue is more one of polish creep.

"If we didn't have the processing power to integrate physics into combat, the game would feel totally different"

"Definitely," laughs Antoniades. "It is polish creep. The amount of times we've redone the characters is ridiculous, or how many times we've reworked game systems to get them to the level we want."



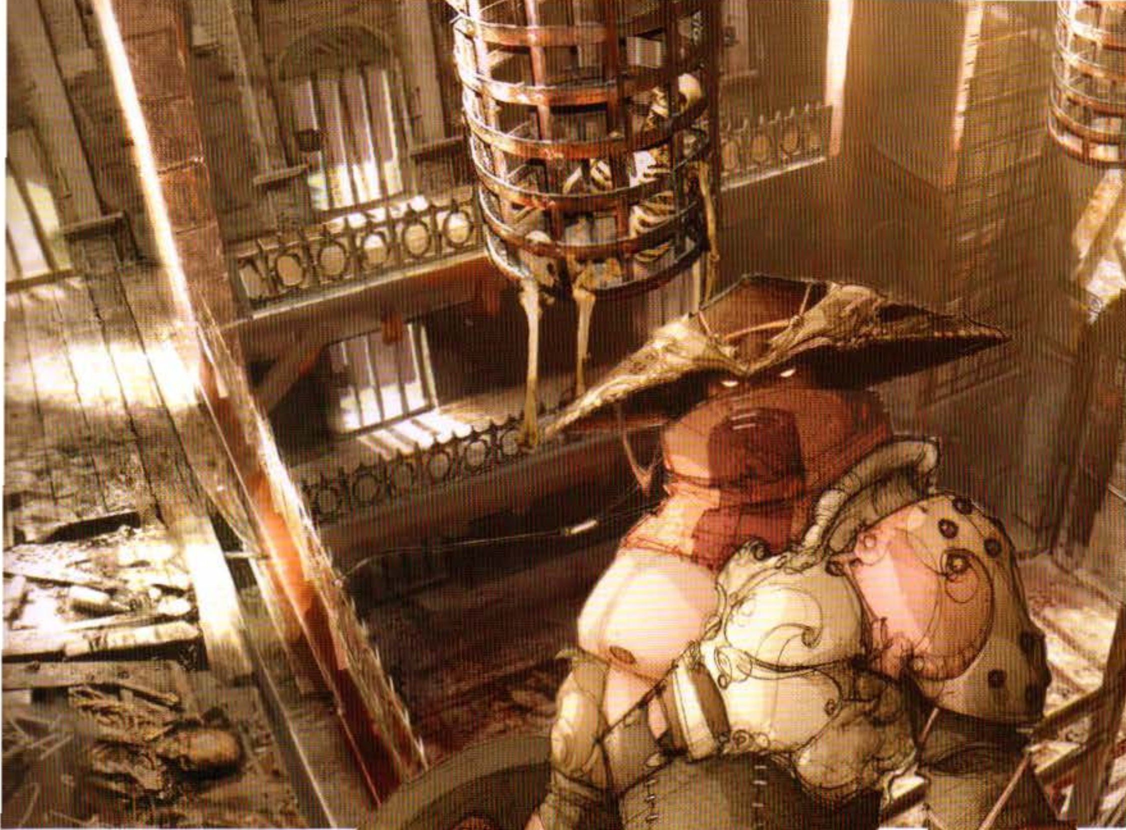


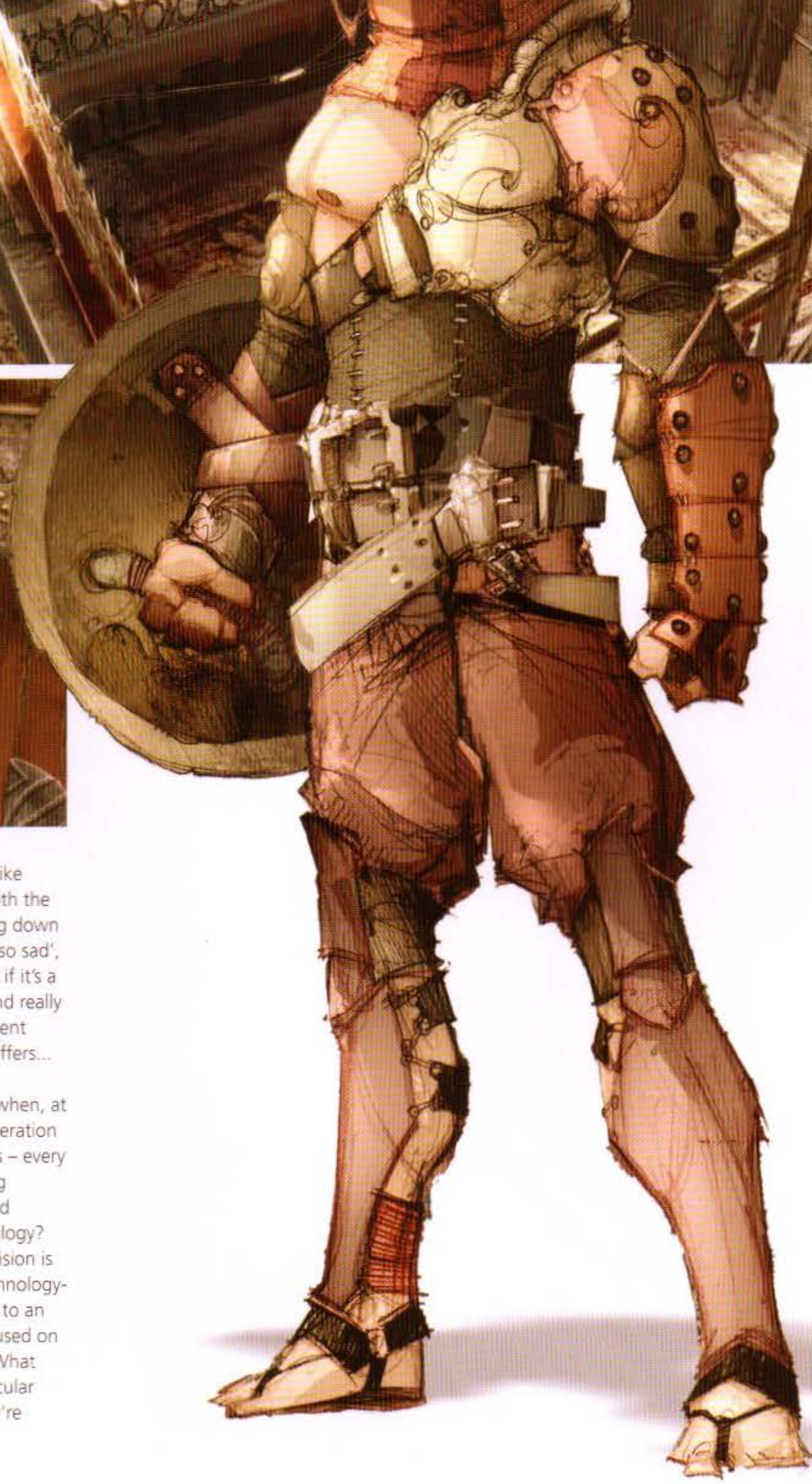
Nariko's tresses are somewhat tentacular in stills, but in dazzling motion it's difficult not to wish that every long-haired character in a PS3 title has an SPE set aside for matters of hair care

It's a level that Ninja Theory wants and Sony needs: if the company line is that the next generation doesn't begin until PS3 arrives, then that machine requires a title to demonstrate exactly what that entails. Historically, each PlayStation has fielded an awkward first wave, and though the PS3's opening lineup stands to benefit from its six-month delay, at a glance few can match the extent of *Heavenly Sword*'s pre-production or ambition. If it's a flagship title by necessity, then, is it also one by design, as much a product now of the platform's strengths as the original plan?

"Well, if we didn't have the processing power to integrate physics into combat, the game would feel totally different. If we weren't able to render so many characters, we couldn't do group combat in a way that's actually its own gameplay mechanic. As we break these barriers we develop systems to take advantage of them," Antoniades says.

Ball recalls the calm after a pitched battle, treading a gentle wake through scores of sprawled corpses and scattered debris, and Antoniades picks up on the image: "People underestimate just how gratifying good visuals and good audio that support the game you're playing can be. It's not trivial – you can't separate visuals and audio and story from a











Concepts of the game's environments follow a theme of tiered verticality and panoramic scope: the former suggesting acrobatic structure for its running battles, the latter all the better to frame Nariko's progress as one warrior against a conquering army

game, certainly not from one like ours. If you have a grey box with the scrolling texture of a tear going down it and a voiceover saying: 'I'm so sad', you're not going to feel it. But if it's a character you've invested in and really believe in, and you see a moment when she breaks down and suffers... It really does all matter."

Does it risk mattering less when, at least on PS3 and 360, this generation looks to be a clash of the epics – every fresh announcement promising emotional resonance, unbridled ambition and a preordained trilogy? Antoniades' next-generation vision is of a shift in attitudes from technology- and feature-driven production to an entertainment medium as focused on the end product as cinema. "What we're doing is creating a particular experience, and everything we're doing on the technology front, not to trivialise it, is to support that. No other game is going to be the *Heavenly Sword* experience."

That much is already true, as it's hard to think of another game that has allowed such an intimate glimpse of its growing pains while still remaining an almost entirely unknown property. Antoniades dryly notes that *KFC* was a lesson in how a game's success is determined long before its release; whether measured by *Heavenly Sword*'s support inside Sony or how the few staffers hardy enough to blog have their posts analysed line-by-line on tech forums, it's safe to say it won't go ignored. So far, so good, so quiet, but that's all about to change: "At this E3 we're going to see some real PS3 footage," says Ball, "and to be one of the first titles shown running on a new platform – as a developer, you've always dreamed of it happening with something you've worked on."

Neither developer appears nervous at the prospect, but then the experience of staking your studio on being able to predict, and outstrip, the next-generation years before it arrives must do wonders for confidence-building. "I think we've set the bar to the limit of our abilities, and that we *are* at the forefront of next-gen rendering and gameplay," Antoniades says, before self-consciously adding the interview's most frequent qualifier: "But I know this is all hot air until people play it."





THINKING BIG

THE MINIATURE HEROES OF LEGO STAR WARS HAD SOME GIANT IDEAS ABOUT GAME DESIGN. WE VISITED ITS PUBLISHER TO FIND OUT HOW TO FOSTER A VIDEOGAMING PHENOMENON

Game publishing isn't usually thought of as a cottage industry, but for Giant a small-scale, craftsman-like approach to game development has been the secret of a big success. Masterminding the *Lego Star Wars* series from a Buckinghamshire cottage, its collaboration with developer Traveller's Tales created a game which went on to sell 3.5 million. This relationship led to the unusual circumstance of developer acquiring publisher, forming TT Games, which sits above Traveller's Tales the developer, and TT Games Publishing, the new name for Giant. We visited managing director **Tom Stone** and development director **Jonathan Smith** to find that their attitude to games is echoed in their attitude to work.

When Giant started, did you expect to form so close a relationship with a single developer, or did you expect to work with a wider range?

Tom Stone: We never planned on getting married to one developer this early on. We planned some expansion by acquisition, or by us being acquired, but as long as we stayed faithful to what we set out to do we didn't mind – and the reason we got married to Jon [Burton, founder and director of Traveller's Tales] is because he shares exactly the same values that we do about games for young gamers. In fact, that's the only reason we got married, if we're completely honest. They are a brilliant developer who have a great track record in this field – and they wanted to get closer to publishing, and we wanted to get closer to development.

It still seems rare to find developers concentrating on making ambitious games for children. Did you feel spoilt for choice when you were looking for partners, or was Traveller's Tales the only obvious candidate?

TS: No, no – there are few out there as passionate

or as capable as Traveller's Tales. We've been married for a year now, and we're still as excited as the first day we got together. Let me give you an example – Friday afternoon, how long were you on the phone to Jon Burton, Jonathan? An hour and a half to two hours on the phone just talking about the game...

Jonathan Smith: Not about the game, just about the unlock structure.

TS: Right, just about the unlock structure, for two hours, on just one day. That level of involvement and enthusiasm is really rare.

JS: And the game's success really is down to the work of every individual on the team – every single artist, programmer and animator at Traveller's Tales made outstanding contributions to the game, because we all shared the same sense of excitement, and the same hopes for what we could achieve with it.

For some developers, the definition of a perfect publisher is one who shuts up and stays out of it. What's the process like when you're working together that closely?

TS: I don't know about you, Jonathan, but the relationship with TT feels perfectly normal.

JS: The word we use to describe it is 'natural'.

TS: Jonathan and I never discussed 'what process shall we implement or structure in order to have a conversation with the people in Manchester?' We just talk to them.

JS: We don't really have a development or publishing process. [Laughter]

But is that an approach that can be scaled up? If you were overseeing a dozen games, would you be able to spend two hours on the phone discussing just one of them?

TS: You've just answered that, really. It's hard to imagine being able to create a game like *Lego Star Wars* in a big organisation.

JS: But isn't it about the development culture? If the culture that we're founded on works in that way, then it doesn't have to be me who's making that call, it could be someone else. It's not us individually.

TS: It goes back to making sure you work with like-minded people. If you have them, you don't have to keep forcing the process down their throats. I feel very strongly that a game such as *LSW* couldn't have been made in a big organisation – too many people, too many opinions would have come down the pipeline.

"EVERY ARTIST, PROGRAMMER AND ANIMATOR MADE OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTIONS BECAUSE WE ALL SHARED THE SAME SENSE OF EXCITEMENT"

Do you feel that some of the things about *LSW* that were unusual and iconoclastic would have been beaten out of it in a more structured, more traditional process?

TS: It was a very small group of people that came up with the ideas for *LSW* – its essence is in probably four or five people. What happens in big organisations is that lots of people then start to say: "Well, I have an opinion about this game..." and the more senior they are, the more you have to listen to that opinion and then all the creativity starts getting squeezed out, and you end up with typical franchises.



JS: I think Lego has to get a lot of credit for *LSW*. The environment we were in at Lego is one where creativity was encouraged, and focused on children and the way they play. All the qualities you mentioned came about because of what Lego triggered. Also, you can have some very creative people – videogames as a business is full of them – but rather than those ideas getting beaten out, a bigger problem is that a lot of people aren't able, or aren't given a chance to express those ideas in the first place because of the process that's in place.

Do you think one of the problems is that everybody thinks they're a bit of a games designer – the marketing department, the accountants, the…

JS: [Interrupting] But everybody is! It's about the ideas that people wouldn't express if they were professional designers. We need more blue-sky thinking. Your scepticism about the validity of those people's ideas is based upon your awareness of the normal constraints of game development. But at some point someone said: 'Imagine if you could drive cars and then get out and fight people', and they were told that it couldn't be done. I'm not advocating anarchy [laughter], and designers have to anticipate things, but everyone who plays games has a right to a view about what they're looking for and what they want to feel.

Do you think there's a fundamental misunderstanding among publishers about how to manage risk?

JS: Are you talking about commercial risk, and originality? This is Seamus Blackley's point, isn't it?

TS: It's worth looking at the evidence. It would seem to me that most successful games have originated from developers – they generally don't originate from publishers. It's the team that says 'why don't we make a game like this…' that makes the successful game. But I think developers are really quite naïve. Why can't they raise the money, or put up their own money and take the risk? Historically, publishers have always taken the risk, because they've got the money. But how did they get that money? They took a risk on your game.

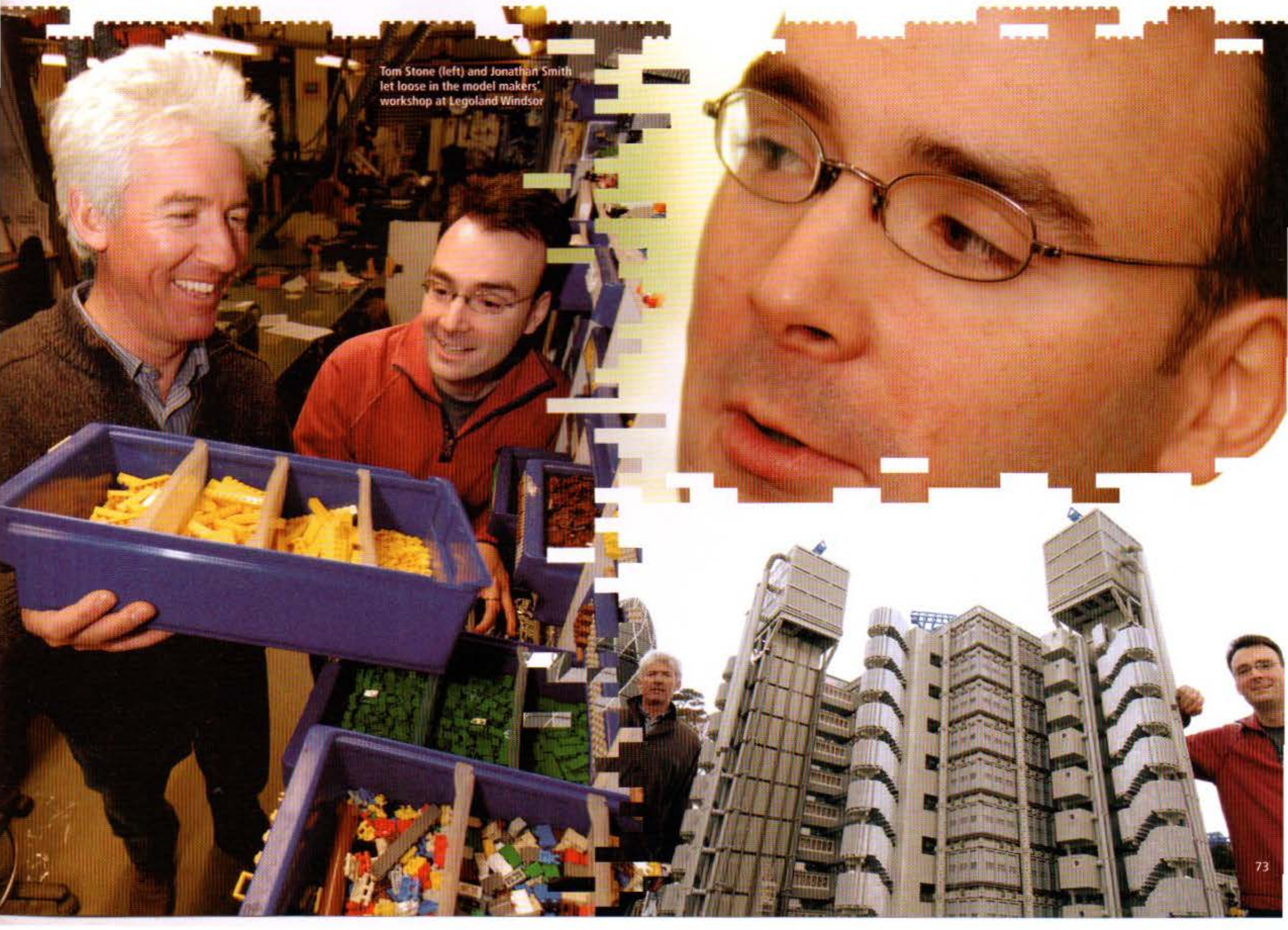
So do you think the whole conventional publishing model needs overhauling?

TS: [Laughs] The thing is, it's hard to imagine a publisher creating a new franchise, because they're all worried about the risk. That's what's making the industry dull and boring and it will turn off the consumer. If it's a publisher-inspired franchise, it's going to be quite boring, safe and dull. It might do OK, but it won't get any critical acclaim. The idea has to come from a group of people who sit around and chat about what features they want in their game, and they are the ones who have to go away and make it happen. It's not a case of someone coming along with a ton of cash and going: 'I got this fantastic idea, I want you to make this game for me'. I just can't think of many examples of where that has been successful.

Is that one of the things that's holding back film licence games, that the publisher buys the licence then goes shopping for a developer to make a game?

TS: It's exactly what happens. Then it's the issue of the ownership of that idea. Is it my idea? No. It's work-for-hire. You're a bricklayer, with no idea of what the house is going to look like.

JS: Bricklayers can do a good job, mind. It comes back to the studio question – can you have very powerful creative producers within the studio system working with independent directors or contracted directors – I think there's evidence that you can. It depends on where the individuals who tend to be most right end up working.



Tom Stone (left) and Jonathan Smith let loose in the model makers' workshop at Legoland Windsor

TS: We're all seeking the holy grail, where we end up with a great game, but there isn't a process. It's the people, really, that make it all – give me the best process in the world, and you can break under the wrong people.

JS: See, this is why we don't have very pat answers, we don't talk about 'how the industry should work' – we're not immersed in it. This comes back to the way we are, and that seems to be working. We don't need to have a ten-year plan. We know we have to do *LSW2*, and we have plans for the following year and games that we're going to kick off then – [to Stone] is that about as far as it goes? Or does it make us sound really naïve? [Laughter]

TS: I get really frustrated when I go to some big meetings, because nothing ever gets done, it's only ever talked about. You get bogged down in the process, and I think it's better to just *do it*. We're in the entertainment industry, y'know – we don't want to get too bogged down with measuring, cutting and dicing. I feel this probably more strongly than Jonathan, I think, because I come from a much bigger process-oriented, sit-around-and-pontificate culture. You're sat in a room blowing smoke up each other's buttocks – and we just knew that we didn't want that in any way here, so I react quite strongly to it. We're not academics.

So how does that immediacy manifest itself? From a development point of view, is it just a case of prototyping very early?

JS: TT has some fantastically well-developed tools for us to deploy, so at the start of the game we can get things rolling very quickly, and show what *LSW* brought to life in action is meant to be like. Because we deal with worlds and brands that we feel a connection to very deeply, and have a great affinity for, a lot of the criteria we have we don't have to analyse because we're entirely orientated towards it already. We don't need a communication plan, it's already in our bones. Our criteria is just 'Is that *Lego Star Wars*?'

TS: In fact, this interview is an example our straightforward approach to life [laughter]. There's not a PR sat in the next room, listening, y'know...

JS: Well there is, you just can't see them because we've shut the door... [Laughter]

TS: Before you came, we didn't even discuss that the interview was happening. And when you leave, there's no post-mortem. We just go back to work.

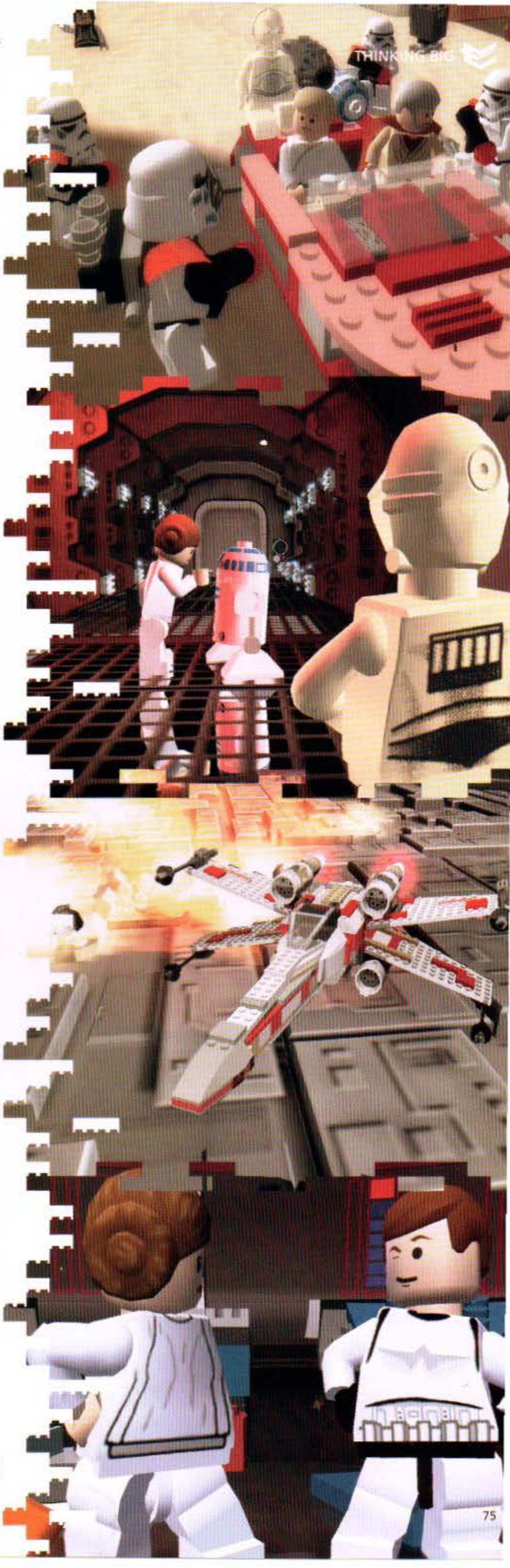
JS: Well, that's the message we decided to give, wasn't it Tom? [Laughter].

TS: Well, it is much more enjoyable not to get caught up with that world of [whispers] 'can I have a quick word with you?' No – just say it to me now! Because that's what makes it satisfying. We talk about it, and literally within the hour or by the next day, it's *done*. It's a pleasure. In a previous life, it would have taken three weeks and lots of being told: 'It can't be done'.

Do you think games are fulfilling their potential at the moment? Or do you think that because videogames are such compelling pieces of entertainment, overall the industry still makes money even though most of the







The new *Lego Star Wars* features Episodes IV-VI, adding improved vehicle sections, richer environments and more flexible coop play to the charisma of the original

games that it produces are of a pretty poor quality?

TS: That's the business we are in now. I don't think you'll get many studio execs asking: 'What was the consumer experience with that game?' They'll say: 'How many did we sell? What was the revenue?' and it will be the economics that drive this business forward. I don't want to be right about that, but I think I am. It's a shame it's not any other way, but what the CEOs will say to you is that the consumers voted with their feet, they went out and bought the games, so what's the problem?

But if the problem is that if the games aren't very good, then with a little more emphasis on quality, those kids will be having a much better experience, and raise the bar for everyone...

JS: And you'd be selling more.

And have you just proved that with the success of *Lego Star Wars*?

JS: [Laughs] So, you know what? Just let them continue making crap games, because we're really happy about how things are going...

***Lego Star Wars* got quite a lot of stick, though, from long-term gamers who felt it was too short or too easy. Do you think you inevitably lose some of the more traditional gamers when you try to break that barrier?**

JS: We think about this a lot. We do take responsibility for those criticisms. Initially when people – when hardcore gamers – said they thought it was fine, but it was short, we'd ask them 'did you see all the secret stuff?' And most of them wouldn't have, and I got frustrated with that. How can you say you've experienced a game when you've not seen what's there? This is a game that encourages replay. And it seems that we're going to take more time to help those disadvantaged older gamers with their special needs [laughs], and help them remember what it's like to play like a young child.

And how much do you think it's going to annoy those hardcore gamers, talking about them in those terms?

JS: [Laughs] But there is a category of hardcore gamers who look to be punished in games, who are used to it. We don't punish people, although you are significantly rewarded for playing well. We found that some players didn't appreciate the positive reinforcement because they were so expecting to be slapped every time they made a mistake, and that's something that we're not willing to change. But we've got to make them more aware of the wonderful world around them this time round.

Don't you run the risk of losing the sense of achievement if you abandon any kind of punishment?

JS: No, punishment doesn't necessarily mean... there was an example used when explaining how the death was going to work in *LSW*, which is *Pro Evo Soccer*, which is a game we play here an awful lot. But the way it instantly replays your opponent's goals – you can always skip the resulting sequence, but there's still that three-second gap where you really *feel it*. You're given a moment to reflect and that's when you feel it so intently, even if it's only for a couple of seconds. And that moment is what happens when you die in *LSW*, and we're very pleased about how that works. From focusing on children, we knew we didn't want to punish. They want to play, and they play best in an atmosphere where they're not afraid. So we wanted to encourage them rather than prevent them from experimenting. Often you die because you were trying to do something interesting. We don't want to punish you because you were doing something you were finding fun.

"THERE IS A CATEGORY OF HARDCORE GAMERS WHO LOOK TO BE PUNISHED IN GAMES, WHO ARE USED TO IT. WE DON'T PUNISH PEOPLE"

children were able to appreciate the game more – they had more patience, they had more time, and fewer expectations learned from other games, and we designed around that. We have children come in to play our games every week. We watch the way they play, in great detail, and ensure we act upon everything we see. Any moments of frustration, anything which isn't being communicated perfectly clearly, is stamped on. They were more delighted in what they found, and that gave them a level of engagement that made sure that they played it for months, and they played it every day. But there were plenty of adults who didn't play like that – and often we didn't do enough to communicate that there was more to do, more to find. Bring that together, and we have an obligation to help those disadvantaged older gamers [laughter] who don't...

TS: Whose only goal is to finish the game. Not *play* the game, but *finish* the game.

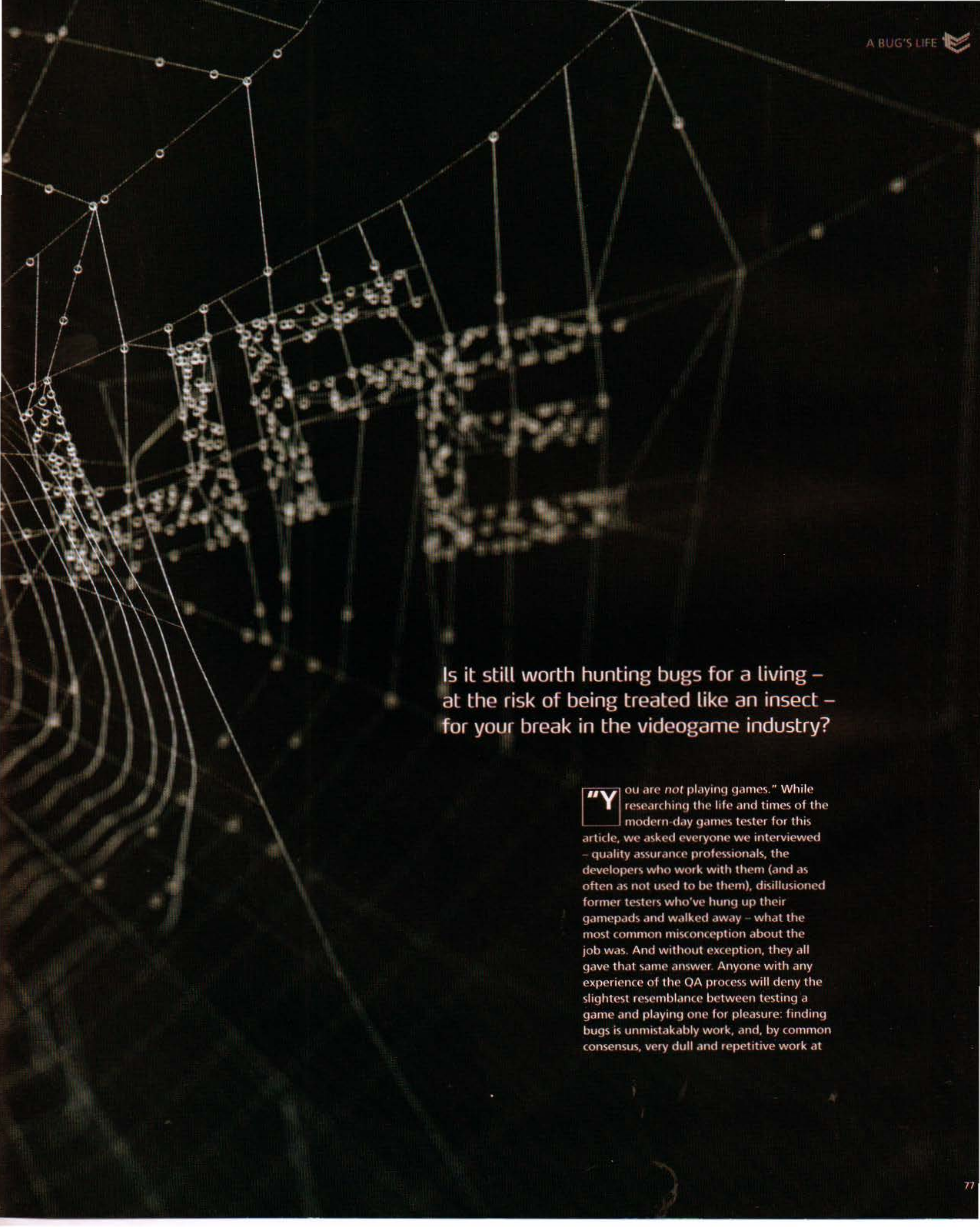
JS: People who don't have that instinct to explore and enjoy. This time round with *Lego Star Wars 2*

It's something we see with early code – sometimes you have a better experience messing around with the early, unbalanced debug modes where you're immortal than once the structure's been put in place, even though it's a bit self-indulgent...

JS: There are two terrible things in game design that are seen as completely normal. One is difficulty curve and the other is balance. Put the two together, and you have an experience that is guaranteed to be predictable, once you're experienced in the way those games unfold. The word 'indulgence' is fantastic – unpredictability, surprise, decadence – that's what games should be. Not punishment.



Illustration: Peter Crowther



Is it still worth hunting bugs for a living – at the risk of being treated like an insect – for your break in the videogame industry?

"You are *not* playing games." While researching the life and times of the modern-day games tester for this article, we asked everyone we interviewed – quality assurance professionals, the developers who work with them (and as often as not used to be them), disillusioned former testers who've hung up their gamepads and walked away – what the most common misconception about the job was. And without exception, they all gave that same answer. Anyone with any experience of the QA process will deny the slightest resemblance between testing a game and playing one for pleasure: finding bugs is unmistakably work, and, by common consensus, very dull and repetitive work at

that. On top of this, pay is often poor, job security frail, working conditions extreme and recognition hard to come by.

So why do it? Most of the thousands of hopefuls who constantly shower publishers and developers with CVs share a passion for gaming that impels them to try to get closer to its source. Some of those are under the mistaken impression they'll be being paid for playtime. A precious few will harbour a genuine taste for the work, and an ambition to make a career of it. The majority, though, will be hoping that breaking games for a living will provide a back door route to making them – either because they have no relevant qualifications, aptitude or experience, or because they do have those things but, despite that, the front door still remains steadfastly, frustratingly shut. It's worked for a great many in the past, but with the changing standards and methodologies of a maturing industry, can it still? And what will you have to go through en route?

Getting through that back door in the first place is far from straightforward. Competition is intense, and there are practical hurdles too: QA departments' workload is very variable, so they usually only offer short-term contracts – three months is normal – and require immediate availability. But many employers put more emphasis on personality and passion for gaming than the usual criteria of education and experience. "Whatever A-levels they've got is irrelevant," says **Andy Robson**, head of testing at Lionhead, which has year-long queues for its global schools work experience programme. "It's really not about qualifications at all. It's enthusiasm, and a willingness to learn, and a real passion for games. The other main trait we look for is communication: you've got to be able to talk to people. With a lot of applicants, their social skills are quite poor."

Some employers are raising the bar, however, and looking for specific understanding of how games are made. "What makes CVs stand out is that they've either done games-related courses at university, or spent time working on mods or art at home," says **Steven Lycett**, Sumo Digital's development producer. "It is critical that testers describe issues as clearly as possible, which in turn entails a basic knowledge of how the games are pieced together," agrees **Arthur Parsons**, an executive designer at Travellers' Tales who started in QA himself. Anything else? "I suggest having problem solving skills, basic PC software skills, some schooling in an electronic field is a bonus too," says **Jai Kristjan**, who worked in testing for four years before graduating to junior producer, and is now a designer at Vancouver start-up Slant Six Games. "And the ability to do a mind-numbing, spirit-crushing repetitive task for long periods of time."

This is what surprisingly few prospective testers understand: that as well as playing the games within normal parameters, or indeed looking for bugs themselves, they'll also be following test plans: performing mundane actions within the game incessantly, according to a timetable set by the designers or lead testers. "Very rarely is testing fun," says '**Paul**' (not his real name), a former tester now working in another area of games publishing. "You'll tire of most games after a week of solid play. Walking into every single wall in a level to find map holes is just one example of a tester's day in pixel hell." Kristjan describes the day-to-day work: "Get a new build of the game, test an area of the game for hours, write up bugs, get a new build, regress your bugs, report failure/success… wash, rinse, repeat for months on end…" Some perspective is perhaps required, though. "Games testing, as a job, is quite possibly the best way to earn yourself £6 an hour," offers up '**David**', another anonymous retired tester, in perhaps rather faint praise. "It definitely beats stacking shelves, hands down."

It's worth bearing in mind that not every tester's job is the same. Publisher QA departments tend to be large, brought in relatively late in the process and asked to do most of the grunt work. Developers' test teams are typically smaller and handle a greater variety of work, though that will depend on how much the company chooses to rely on publisher QA. Testers at prestige studios like Bizarre Creations and Lionhead can expect to have some creative input: "[Bizarre's testers] do far more than just test," says Bizarre's commercial director **Sarah Chudley**. "They're involved in feedback on the design of the games and the balancing of the gameplay. They could be helping out with PR activities or working with the designers on new ideas."

"People don't think we're creative in any way, but that's not how Lionhead's department is run," concurs Robson. "We give a lot of feedback – we might have 100 suggestions about combat, they might use one, they might use all of them. But a lot of QA departments only see the game when it's alpha, and it's too late. They're not really going to change anything."

Like their development brethren, testers are no strangers to the nightmare of crunch. "The work load builds up towards the end, when the title goes to RC [release candidate] status," warns David. "It's at this

"Very rarely is testing fun. Walking into every single wall in a level to find map holes is just one example of a tester's day in pixel hell"





stage that you may be expected to sign on to inhuman amounts of overtime. On some occasions, shifts are extended by a further eight hours, sometimes more. And then there is overtime to be carried out during weekends. It's likely that you will not see a single day off in months. When you sign a contract, you may notice that you're made to opt out of regulation four of the working time regulations, thus legally allowing you to do this."

"I have one story to chill the bones of anyone interested in going into QA," states Kristjan with, it turns out, justified confidence. "At one company, I stepped into a vital role as the only senior tester, and my managers did everything to keep me on site and organising the test team. My boss bought me a hammock, which he installed while I was at lunch, that I would sleep in almost every night. When I complained about needing clean clothing they had the secretary buy me a new wardrobe. A cell phone was bought for me, to get a hold of me whereever I was, even in the bathroom; when I complained about not seeing my girlfriend in two weeks – I lived with her – they paid for a hotel room for us twice a week to see each other. I did this almost straight seven days a week for seven months... when it was done I spent three months decompressing from the ordeal."

It's common for an aggressive, competitive atmosphere to develop in QA departments as testers look for any way they can to will themselves through these painful endurance tests. One programmer describes a test section he once worked in as a "testosterone pit" driven by intense competition on bug-finding leaderboards. Others resort to more extreme measures – there's a story of the management at one

The ones that got away

"As a tester, I prided myself in breaking the product once it had gone into final production, and I felt like I single-handedly tossed a grenade into the finalising process that caused massive, title-wide damage. You take pleasure in the little things when you're at the bottom," laughs Kristjan. "But bugs make it through, they always have and they always will." Here are some more notable examples of those that did:

Metropolis Street Racer
(Sega, DC)



PGR's precursor was so infected with bugs – including a broken scoring system and a perpetual Tokyo night – that it was still being tested by Sega's UK QA a month *after* its release. A largely fixed version was sneaked on to shelves, but the replay mode never saw the light of day in Europe.

Broken Sword: The Shadow Of The Templars
(Bam! Entertainment, GBA)



Despite being an excellent piece of work in many respects, Revolution's handheld conversion contained a big problem. If you visit Spain before Syria – easily done, and thousands did it – a key NPC will be missing, further progress impossible, and the game will have to be restarted from scratch.

Super Mario Bros
(Nintendo, NES)



The trick of sliding through a wall and into a warp pipe that leads to a never-ending looped level called 'World -1' is proof that not even the finest games or most stringent QA standards are perfect. It's also, thanks to its nickname 'Minus World', an almost poetic expression of gaming purgatory.

Black & White
(EA, PC)



Prior to patch, Lionhead's god game was a festival of bugs, but the worst was the perpetually starving worshippers who had to be fed every few minutes. That it would punish the most bountiful and benevolent deities with an escalating evil rating was a cruel irony beyond most coding mistakes.

Boiling Point: Road To Hell
(Atari, PC)



A legend in bug-watching circles, we'll take any excuse to revive the poignant surrealism of its patch notes. 'Fixed: The two policemen appear to stare at the ground. Fixed: Jaguar floats across screen at tree-top level. Fixed: NPC standing in chairs. Fixed: Dog does not cast shadows. Fixed: The size of the moon.'

Age Of Empires: The Age Of Kings
(Majesco Games, DS)



This is no ordinary crash bug: just picking the 'Save and quit' option can be enough to not only cause a crash and the wipe the game save, but to actually destroy the game itself, rendering the cartridge unusable. It's caused by players entering two- or three-letter profile names. Be warned.



developer/publisher requesting QA staff 'bring their own mirrors' after cleaners complained about the amount of cocaine they were having to wipe from the toilet seats. And yet it's an odd fact that, at crunch time, testers can find themselves the object of developer jealousy. As measly as QA pay usually is, it's usually hourly, and over 14-hour days it can easily outstrip that of salaried artists, designers and coders.

Creative staff are less likely to be jealous of the uncomfortable or downright unsafe working conditions testers can find themselves in. "The worst was being sent to help test for a development company which was not prepared for another person – they had my PC on the floor, in a closet without any light," recalls Kristjan. But whereas that might be an uncomfortable one-off, David's account of the test room at the publisher he worked at sounds like institutional carelessness on a surprising scale.

"Despite how big this company was, there were never enough games consoles for all the testers to work on. No effort was made to buy in more consoles to rectify the situation. The same went for memory cards; sometimes a whole team would be sharing one memory card for the whole of the day. Often you were provided with a broken controller that rattled, with buttons not functioning, exposed wires or a cracked, broken casing. We were generally working on 12-inch televisions with broken headphone sockets. These old televisions were also used for testing NTSC versions of games, but they didn't support 60hz, so it meant playing games in black and white.

"Our health and safety was definitely not one of the company's priorities. Wrist rests were not provided for those working on PC games day in and day out, and some people, including myself, began to suffer from the symptoms of RSI. Daisy-chaining multiple multi-plug adapters together was also common practice, which meant that when one fuse blew, the majority of the televisions and consoles would turn off, meaning people would lose their play-throughs. We were also made to use NTSC power supplies with the UK power outlets without using appropriate converters.

"The worst was being sent to help test at a company that wasn't prepared for me. They had my PC on the floor, in a closet without a light"

Instead, we were shown how to take a ballpoint pen and jam it into the top hole of the plug socket to make the American two-pin power supplies fit into a live three-pin multi-plug adapter."

You won't find anyone who'll deny that testing is an absolutely vital part of the process of game creation; but equally, and hardly surprisingly in the face of the above evidence, most admit that it's seldom treated as such. "I don't think there's enough respect for test departments in development," says Robson plainly. "Here at Lionhead we've got a lot of respect, they listen to what we say – we play the games every day, we know what we're talking about. But on the whole we're not listened to enough, without a doubt. I've worked with big publishers, and most of them hire just kids, that's the trouble. Just for numbers. They've got 100, but we can do the same job with 20." Chudley, however, has only praise for what she says is the professional and informed, and exclusively graduate, testing staff at Microsoft.

Parsons agrees that the problem is down to hiring practices, although he points the finger at pay: "I think that QA departments do get a bad rap at times, and testers themselves do not necessarily get the respect that they may well deserve. As a tester in this country the money is not great, which means that it can be tricky to attract the right people to it. It is usually these people that in turn make the development staff lose faith with QA departments. There was definitely a case of 'them and us' when I was in QA, and that probably hasn't changed." As a result, he has a strong personal preference for on-site testing: "It's always a far more valid use of resources and is hugely beneficial to a title. Whereas sometimes, dealing with an external QA department, it can feel as though they are working against you, kind of the game police trying to catch you out."

Testers talk about the same friction, though for their part it's down to being scapegoats for buggy software, when in many instances the bug will have been found but simply not fixed for budget or scheduling reasons. "Only once did we let a major bug slip through in the course of many years," says Paul of his former publisher QA unit. "A team that big – there were 50 – working that many hours will spot all the major stuff. Higher-ups then decide which bugs to waive and tend to waive more than we'd like, especially if they're running late with the final builds. This attitude that buggy games are always QA's fault pisses me off, to be honest. QA gets shit from every direction – the public, their wages, management, grumpy developers who don't want to hear their game is broken, not to mention the work itself."

Club mentality

How different is the QA environment in Japan? A Kyoto-based expat Brit talks method and Mario Club

Mario Club, Nintendo's legendary in-house QA department, is probably the only testing team in the world that can be said to possess mystique. **Dylan Cuthbert** first encountered it as a young programmer at Argonaut in the early '90s, when working on the SNES's *Starfox*. Since then he's done stints in Sony offices in California and Tokyo, but now his position as president of Kyoto's boutique developer Q-Games, currently working with Nintendo on a soon-to-be-announced DS title, brings him full-circle. As such he's well-placed to compare the differences in QA working practices between west and east.

Of the test departments he's worked with, "the most proficient was Mario Club. However, Sony America's QA worked shifts so you would get bugs in the morning as well as in the evening, and that's quite important when development teams are in crunch mode." At the high level he's used to – platform-holder QA – he feels western testers are more modernised and better systematically, but the Japanese more willing to go the extra mile. "Sony America used quite good software for the bug tracking itself, whereas Mario Club seem to use Excel. But then, Mario Club records all bugs as .avi [video] files and you download them from their server, which is very cool. Even back when I was making *Starfox* they would compile videos of the bugs, which, in 1992, was rare."

Cuthbert's colleague at Q-Games, programmer **Rhodri Broadbent**, puts it down to the dedicated national mindset: "Even when I'm given a bug from one of my artist colleagues here, they spend ages whittling down all the variables to make it easier. I think there might be something about Japanese attention to detail and diligence that makes them better at reporting relevant details. And certainly, they work incredibly long hours at Mario Club, but they have the rare luxury that they are much more 'listened to'."

Despite this – and despite Mario Club's fearsome reputation – QA is not valued within the Japanese industry as individual experience. "QA is not a route into games development in Japan," states Cuthbert. "In order to get into a games company in Japan you have to apply in the same way a college graduate would apply for a new job. People with no formal education don't have much chance here I'm afraid. Sometimes, even in Mario Club, you get the hanger-on testers who do try to make a career out of it, but advancement from there into a job with any kind of game creating responsibility is very painful.

"Mario Club gets an enormous amount of respect within Nintendo but it's the institution more than the people; the testers themselves aren't 'career testers', they are part-timers doing work between jobs, and as a result can be a greatly varied age group." As much as it closes a door for enthusiastic amateurs trying to get into the industry, provided the quality of work can be maintained – and it can – manning test departments with casual staff actually provides developers with a richer seam of feedback, says Cuthbert. "At Sony America, the testers were clearly 'gamers', so aside from bug reports any comments they might have would be from that perspective only. I prefer the Mario Club method, because you get all sorts of people testing your game."

It's a bleak picture of overworked, undervalued staff and broken relations – though it must be stressed that the fault-lines exist mostly between developers and publisher QAs, and between publisher QAs and their employers, while in-house testers at developers fare much better. But ask whether these hurdles are worth overcoming for a shot at a job as a junior designer or producer – or even testing as a career in its own right – and even those who've suffered worst will defend it to the hilt.

"It aided me more than I can say," says Kristjan. "It taught me every facet of the development process and allowed me the chance to hone my skills. I can't think of anyone in development that couldn't benefit from at least one project cycle testing a product to look at the project from a valuable point of view. In a funny way I went to school for four years and got my degree which allowed me to join the development team… only thing is, I got paid for that time, and have no scholastic debt."

Not many developers claim to actively seek out QA experience when hiring creative staff, but most acknowledge that a significant proportion of their employees have such experience, almost by default: the combination of learning and networking opportunities makes the gravitational pull of the job almost irresistible. And of course, the chance to get noticed internally is priceless, especially within a company with a relatively enlightened attitude to testing like Lionhead. "It's a good breeding ground for the company," confirms Robson. "Quite a few go into production, junior design, scripting, art, animation. We'll never hold anyone back in that way. If they can better themselves and the company's confident, we let them go. Obviously it's a pain for me, but it gives another opportunity for someone else. Senior guys like Peter [Molyneux] come over to us and say we'd like to hire this guy, and I'm like: 'You *bastards*'. But I'm proud of it too."

He is clear, however, that viewing QA as no more than a transitional purgatory on the way to greener pastures won't help your employment prospects, and nor will it help testing escape its devalued status. "A lot of people do see it as a stepping stone. We try and drill that out of them, we want them to stay with us for two years. People that write that [they want to move up] on their CV, those are the people I won't even look at, because they're looking for a quick exit. I don't think enough people stay in test."

He may get his wish. For all that testing experience is still a common CV footnote, it's increasingly just that: a footnote, a summer job done during one of the university courses that are squeezing out the opportunities for graduates of the games industry's unofficial vocational school. "I don't actually think that QA is such a good route into the industry anymore," warns Parsons. "There are so many universities now that offer courses in game design, game production and development, alongside courses in specialist areas like coding, art and animation, that it is harder to get the break out of QA. That is not to say that it is not still possible, it is just harder now than it was seven or eight years ago."

Perhaps that's no bad thing. It's beyond doubt – and to the industry's immense benefit – that QA still provides an opening into videogames creation for determined, unrefined (some might say unspoilt) talent. But if the chances of success are a little slimmer, then there will be a greater proportion of games testers who aren't necessarily looking for the exit as soon as they've entered. And when testers start to respect their jobs as potential careers, they may eventually begin to command that respect – currently so desperately lacking – from others.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion



With the Cyrodiil tamed and the clumsy levelling system sussed, it's time to start all over again and unleash the greatest of the game's havoc-causing weapons: hindsight.
360, TAKE-TWO

Final Fantasy XII



It's an *FF* game that doesn't actually hate you: beautiful, flexible, accommodating, forgiving. Who'd have imagined actively looking for fights, rather than cursing them?
PS2, SQUARE ENIX

Battlefield: Modern Combat



A confident handover from DICE company to EA high command has earned the Chertsey contingent an unexpected medal of honour. Now, if only the servers could stay alive.
360, EA

Taste the difference
How games can choose to be better



Funcom's forthcoming *Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* won't ask you to choose your basic character type until level five, and your specialisation until level 20. Why is it so rare for games to give you this acclimatisation time?

If videogames were ever to do a version of the Pepsi challenge, there'd be a twist – and not one of lime or coffee. If videogames did the Pepsi challenge you'd have to choose without tasting. The menu screen would give you a choice between glass A, glass B or glass C and you'd take the plunge. And 15 hours later, whether sipping a sparkly, tangy glass of cola or a warm slosh of watery syrup, you're stuck with your choice.

Games continually ask you to choose without letting you try before you buy. From difficulty levels to class types, you're asked to commit in haste and regret at leisure. Even something as approachable as *Kingdom Hearts II* is fraught with early choices. The first is difficulty: 'easy', 'normal' or 'hard' never tell you much about where the game is going to be pitched. And *Kingdom Hearts* ups the ante by offering not a 'hard' mode, but a Proud mode. How's that for pressure selling? And just exactly how proud will you feel when the first boss crushes you like a bug and you have to restart and demote yourself to humbler beginnings?

And then there are your stats. Do you want to wield magic, brandish swords or defend to the hilt? Not sure? Want to try? Well, you can't. Make your choice, and hope you like what you get.

Choices, of course, are what make games games: they are at the heart of interactivity. But the better informed the player is, the more rewarding they're likely to find their decisions. Yet most games place the most significant choices at the start of the game – indeed often before the game has even properly begun. From there on in, you're likely to be able to fine-tune, but what use is that if you've already made a fundamental mistake? Surely that trend should be flipped: let us shape the trivial, peripheral details – a name, a haircut, a home town – at the outset and make the big decisions once we know the world and its rules first-hand.

So don't make us choose a difficulty without having ever been in a fight. Don't plot the course of the next 50 hours of stat-development before we've even raised a wand. If it's a choice we're likely to care about more than a preferred brand of cola, why not leave it until we know what we're doing?









Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: MAY 26 PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: BIG HUGE GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E160





Varied and wonderfully realised, each of the game's environments offers a wealth of indigenous structures and armies, as well as strategy-defining features such as fiery chasms, archipelagoes and cliffs

It's hard to think of a more intimidating inspiration for a game than Leonardo da Vinci, a man whose technical brilliance and creative flair mean he still stands, half a millennium on, as a symbol for the point at which art intersects invention. But unfazed, Brian Reynolds has found in da Vinci's life and works – the tale of an artist consumed by science – a look, a theme and a cathartic premise for his exceptional RTS. What if the fight between magic and technology, when confronted by a force empowered by both, was to become a union?

Having helped establish *Civilization*'s benevolent tyranny over the territory of turn-based strategy, Reynolds' departure from Firaxis in 2001 took him across the border into a war zone, fought in realtime by scores of Indians, but no chiefs. But that battle, rather than driving progress, instead held back the evolution of the RTS. If Big Huge Games, the studio he founded, was a bid to restore some form of government, and *Rise Of Nations* its manifesto, then *Rise Of Legends* is its proclamation of power. A steampunk epic, it's a labour of both love and sympathy, calling for its constrained genre to rise and lay siege to gaming at large.

> Why shouldn't a strategy game have a three-act narrative, dramatic weight and a catalogue of scripted events?







At its heart lies a question. There may be a lack of cinematic potential to the RTS camera, its horizon lost somewhere underground, but why should that prevent it from telling stories? Why shouldn't a strategy game have a three-act narrative, dramatic weight and a catalogue of scripted events? Its answer, though best appreciated within the context of its genre, is emphatic. Because its three campaigns comprise the framework of its tale – expositions and denouements occurring at the beginnings and ends of each – it's able to leave intervening developments to the player's discretion. Chance encounters with supporting characters, the defining of heroes and the tides of war all occur within familiar Conquer The World scenarios, creating an unexpectedly strong example of freeform interactive storytelling. An example, moreover, that's beautifully illustrated.

Never one to underestimate how a few frames of animation can turn a machine into a character, and a character into a hero, *Rise Of Legends* brings to its units a table-top substantiality. Artillery and assault platforms gasp steam as they stride across the terrain, expressing themselves further by swatting and blasting ragdoll infantry in all directions. So complete are the designs of their external shells that it's hard not to imagine the crashing pistons and roaring fires, the vapour mechanics and kinotropes toiling within. Cities are similarly ornate – lacquered in grease, blanketed by coal-dust and bristling with manned mechanisms, rewarding successful offensives by flying apart in bursts of Ageia-powered physics. Its audio is an exquisite mix of clamour and song. Battles reverberate with the firework crackles of rifles, contests between steel limbs and the thunder of collapsing masonry. If there's an assumption that the RTS is ill-equipped to match the flashes and bangs of the HD era, consider it debunked.

Rise Of Legends' watchword, in fact, is definition. Its great leap has been to address the stubborn issues of the generic RTS interface – previously the subject of some procrastination. The wisdom behind the assignment of tooltips, optional pop-ups (the integration of tutorial and campaign is



The definitions may change between races, but the facilities upon which they rely are often functionally similar. Cities expand via districts, each offering its own resource cap increases and productivity bonuses





Units are technologically themed for each race, the Vincians favouring clockwork and steel, the Alim uniting fire, glass and sand, while the Cuotl combine the powers of the sun and the stars to often stunning effect



Prior to a mystical awakening in the game's later stages, Vincian inventor Giacomo's sole concern is vengeance against the imperious Doge for the murder of his older brother. The final showdown awaits at the end of the first campaign, as do tragedy and the rise of a darker evil





Each race has several top-tier devices with which to rout the opposition. The dreaded Vincian Doomcannon guarantees colossal damage for any exposed enemy target

considerate) and contextual pointers here cannot be understated. Refinements suggested by the evolution of *Rise Of Nations* through its *Thrones & Patriots* expansion – the carrying over of your army from one battle to the next, for one – build on the game's winning sense of continuity, and its attrition-based mode of combat has evolved to be more coherent than ever. Its city-based alternative to the formerly era-based tech tree is a bold, successful move.

But while efforts have been made to delay the inevitable – the resource distributions of most maps favour early hit-and-run strikes and only a subsequent consolidatory approach – the climax of combat is still the methodically-staged tank rush. It's a stock and release (or stockpile and unleash) process that's timeless, but not altogether tireless. *Rise Of Legends* may open with a world built by the blueprints of Babbage and da Vinci, but its mechanical heritage is that of *Dune 2000*. For all its brilliance, there are also times when the game seems to lapse into an exhausted slump, characterised by a paper-chase level here or a repeat scenario there – perhaps unavoidable, but nonetheless a drop in form.

Reassurance comes quickly thanks to the well-polished quick match and multiplayer modes. A generous body of maps charts the entirety of the game's broad ecosphere, its *Age Of Mythology*-inspired Dominance icons encouraging breaks from stockpiling duties and a broader tactical repertoire. With a wealth of major heroes and units available for all races (see 'Race relations'), players are guaranteed a colourful and multi-faceted skirmish, though it pays to remember that these, at heart, will be battles you've fought a hundred times before.

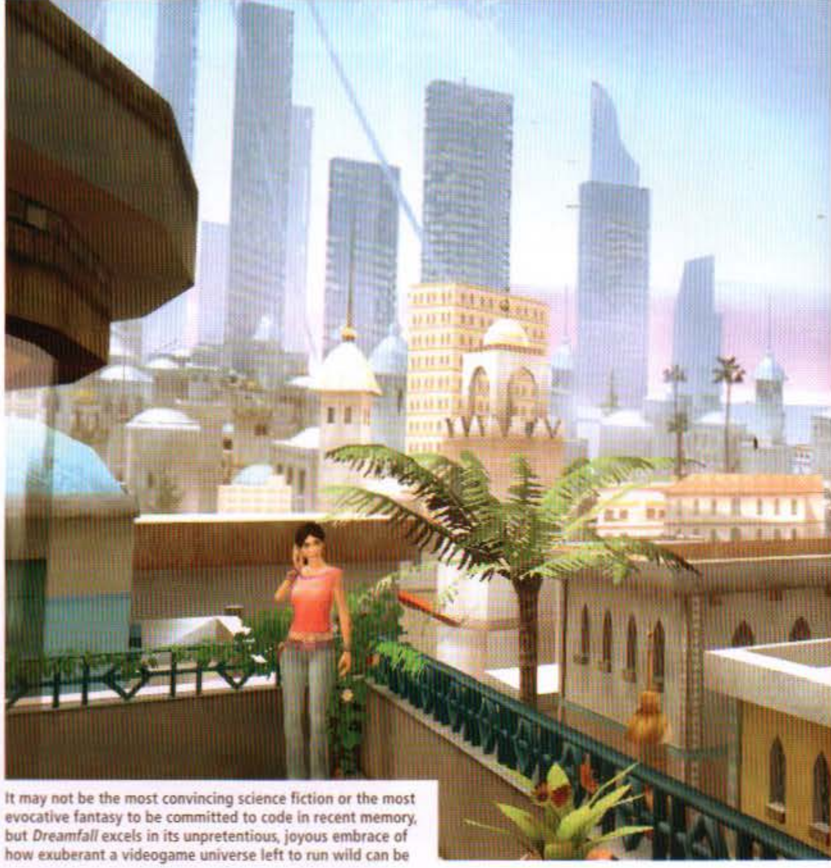
Big Huge Games has dressed the RTS in its finest coat-tails, sent it on the most captivating of journeys and transformed its communication skills. There's no question it has become a creature with broader horizons and more refined taste, but there's also no question it's still a familiar figure. *Rise Of Legends* is a majestic makeover, but of all the influences it has drawn from Leonardo, the one it exhibits least is raw invention. **[8]**

Race relations



The risk was always there that out of technology and magic, one would end up victorious, but BHG has worked wonders in keeping each of its civilisations not only interesting, but captivating to command. Catering to popular tastes in RTS artistic design – sci-fi, history and fantasy – the Cuotl, Vincians and Alim offer a grand array of units and architectures. Inter-species battles play host to sonorous exchanges of fire, with the beam and shock weapons of the Cuotl acting as a perfect foil for the rifles and dreadnaughts of their industrious opponents. As eclectic as the civilisations are, however, it's the factional heroes and entanglements within them that gives the game its real depth. The three campaigns build deftly to tremendous climactic battles.





DREAMFALL: THE LONGEST JOURNEY

FORMAT: PC (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: £30
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EMPIRE
DEVELOPER: FUNCOM PREVIOUSLY IN: E145





Most of *Dreamfall's* running time is spent listening in on people's conversations, so it's a shame that they suffer from the usual game VO issues: flow broken by the unnatural pauses between sound files, and the obviousness of the solitary readings despite the actors' best efforts

Dreamfall is a game about questions of faith. They're posed through the vulnerability of its characters, from the affectingly mundane to the overbearingly theatrical; through snapshots of a world of science (fiction) and a world of magic, both undergoing their own crises of confidence.

But they're also part of the game design itself. *Dreamfall* asks adventure game players to have faith in the addition of action elements, and the absence of extended puzzles. It asks those who never cared for the gentle rhythm of A to B and back again to believe it can be more meaningful than following hyperlinks through a digital fantasy novel. This is a game that has all but abandoned challenge or obstruction – even more so than the black sheep of Lucasfilm's adventures, *Loom* – on faith in the experience it can deliver.

Like *The Longest Journey* before it, *Dreamfall's* ambition is far greater than its delivery can contain, despite taking adventure games' density of texture and discarding nearly everything else. There's a storm of stories jostling for attention when it could have been a wiser, if probably not a better game, if it had have told only one. It's an interactive travelogue, charting both a culture-blended vision of the future that could be pulled from the pages of Wired magazine, and a fairytale history that walks a knife-edge between arch seriousness and absurdist humour. Vibrantly alive, it communicates a sense of distance travelled better than games many times less linear, and can be trusted never to stop and ask: 'Do you get it?'

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Also like *TLJ*, the game's characters – the game's *people* – have a lot to say: sometimes at unnatural length, sometimes with delivery that trips on the emotional beats, somehow almost always worth listening to regardless. A journey marked by people as much as locations, *Dreamfall's* efforts to repopulate videogames' voice with more than two nationalities can stray into regional stereotype, yet even its most laboured deliveries and clichéd speeches have a rare human spark. If you share director Ragnar Tornquist's view that being engaged in dialogue is a form of gameplay, then there's a richness here that few other titles have the luxury or ability to create.

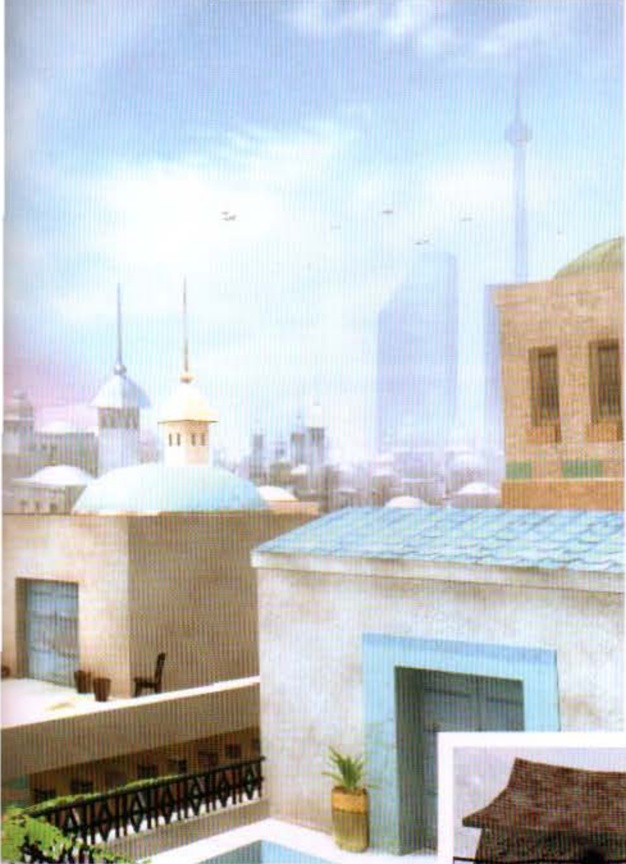
And it needs to be that rich, as *Dreamfall* makes few other concessions to expected notions of play. There are no obtuse puzzles

It may not be the most convincing science fiction or the most evocative fantasy to be committed to code in recent memory, but *Dreamfall* excels in its unpretentious, joyous embrace of how exuberant a videogame universe left to run wild can be



Though *Dreamfall* is playable without knowledge of *TLJ's* events, it reintroduces characters and plotlines that will resonate more with veterans, as well as bittersweet (or just plain bitter) reflections on the decade since















Assassin Kian (above) sadly gets the least screen time of the three leads, undergoing his transformative experience off-stage – doubly disappointing given his excellent voice actor



because you're not supposed to stop, think and consider what comes next any more than the lead characters do. The action elements aren't strong enough to involve on their own because they're only intended to punctuate the story: simple in method but expressive in tone.

Unfortunately, combat is so awkward as to sap the momentum it should have conveyed, no matter how soundly placed it is within the narrative. The best that can be hoped for is an empty, functional one-button victory, otherwise it drags out without grace or drama. Stealth play is far better expressed within the game's overall sense of motion, capturing its essence as a mood piece rather than an overused, overcomplicated mechanic. Where combat remains identical throughout the game's progress, stealth sections prove confidently adaptive, able to flick from the urban dread of *Manhunt* to the cloying gloom of *Thief* on cue.

For all the moments that recall other titles, even its predecessor, the game *Dreamfall* most intensely feels like is itself, a game that when stripped down to the basics of interaction allows you to move a character through the world, and little more. But it's never less than intensely aware of how important it is that you're along for the ride. Even fleeting moments, surely cutscene material, maintain that simple player control – not enough to change events, but to ensure that you share them, to sometimes walk rather than run because you know that's what the character would do. You're completely omniscient and completely powerless, necessary to drive the story but unable to turn its course, instead only savouring it while it lasts.



The 'focus field', functionally similar to *Mark Of Kri*'s targeting, allows the (signposted) points of interaction to be accessed from a distance. This may offer alternate actions, such as eavesdropping on private conversation

And it doesn't last long enough. *Dreamfall* isn't overly short, but you'll sense that the pages are running out far in advance of the story doing so. Sure enough, the conclusion, if it can be called that, suffers from the game's positioning as the second of a trilogy. Most plots go unfinished, and some are left unstarted: returning *TLJ* players hoping for answers will be given more questions, and newcomers are likely to be utterly bewildered. Intentionally bitter in its lack of closure – this is to be the saga's Empire Strikes Back – it's still a misjudgement of what *Dreamfall* previously understood so well about storytelling in games. Passively read or watched, a lack of resolution only disappoints: but when a story has been played, shared and controlled, an empty conclusion can cheapen the sense of achievement in what's gone before.



***Dreamfall*'s primary character, Zoe, is a poor little rich girl compared to more put-upon previous heroine April – but she's endearing, and the script's charting of her journey from naïvete to determination convinces. As do her moments of marvellously enunciated profanity**

Dreamfall's greatest test of faith, then, may not concern how willingly you'll surrender to its vision of videogame storytelling, but if you're prepared to wait another five years for a satisfying ending. Or perhaps it's whether you can see the journey as everything, and destination be damned.

[7]

Crossing the divide



Platform differences are minimal and cosmetic: the Xbox version's industrial application of shaders may outsparkle some lesser PCs and graphics cards, but the muddier texture resolution is noticeable in the painterly backdrops and character close-ups. *Dreamfall*'s concise control scheme is second nature on an Xbox controller, and the PC version allows use of a gamepad to replicate it, but its default keyboard-and-mouse option (one for movement, the other for camera) becomes just as transparent in all but a few tight corners.






There is generous freedom to customise your team with ability points. Once distributed between your characters, they unlock skills

KINGDOM HEARTS II

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£28)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: BUENA VISTA GAMES DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX

Chewing Gummi



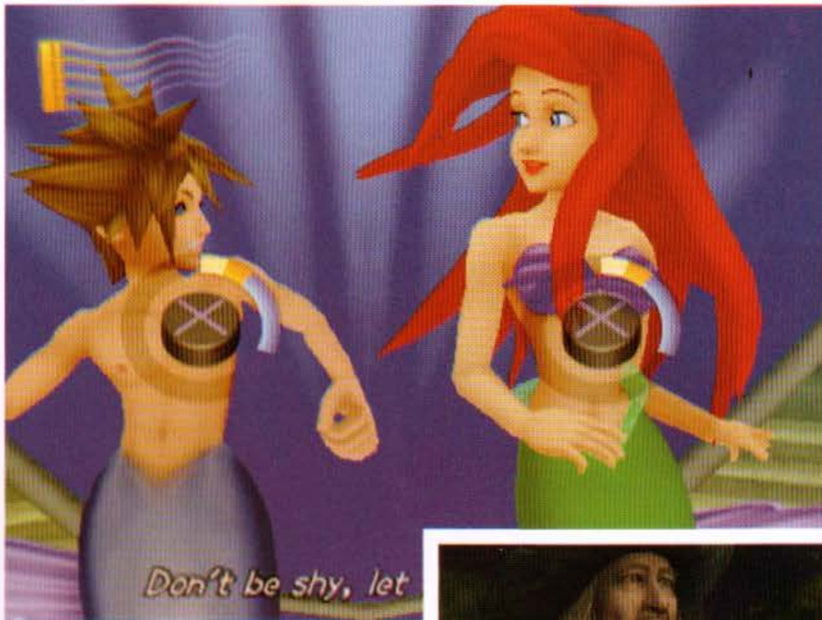
Each of Disney's worlds is represented as a planet in a star system. Sora et al must travel from world to world via the Gummi Ship, a spacecraft piloted by Chip and Dale, through 3D shoot 'em up passageways. This element of the game has had a considerable rework since its bland implementation in the first instalment, and the twirling backgrounds and swathes of bullets make for a highly effective set of minigames.

By defeating key enemies, new parts for your customisable ship are unlocked and many an hour can be spent working on the perfect offensive/defensive balance for your vessel.

The first four hours of *Kingdom Hearts 2* are painfully protracted. Inelegant, overblown cutscenes showboat Square Enix's very worst excesses. The drawn-out conversations drip with faux drama, pregnant pauses undercutting the clumsy dialogue, and are punctuated with one-dimensional gameplay vignettes of little purpose or pleasure.

Worse, the gloopy mess of plot relies on having near total recall of the preceding two instalments of this mostly successful marriage with Disney. Indeed, at the first hurdle it would seem as though the developer has forgone everything that made the original so beloved, the pacy narrative and scattershot cameos from animation's halls of fame apparently traded for puffed-up narrative parading as profound.

But struggle through and this prolonged prologue eventually bows to the familiar trio of Sora, Donald and Goofy as they make their way from Disney universe to universe, racing through each well-loved storyline crowbarred into Square's wider plot. Virtually every game element that made the first *Kingdom Hearts* Square's second best selling IP after *Final Fantasy* has been tweaked and improved. The fight mechanic on which the gameplay pivots is now satisfyingly varied. Reaction commands can be triggered mid-combo in context sensitive moments that, if successfully met, see Sora perform wonderfully cinematic finishing blows before a spectacular weaving camera. Team combos, summon commands (invoking such fearsome backup as Chicken Little), quick-tap switchable party members, magic attacks, augmentable skill sets and complex combat forms for Sora all conspire to promote the illusion that this isn't simply a button-mashing marathon.



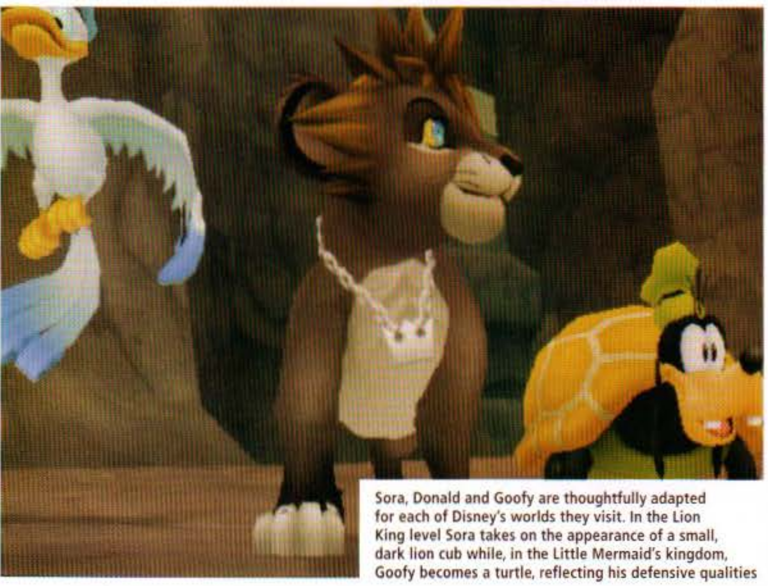
The sheer variety of minigames on offer will keep any attention-deficit gamer happy and, as the game keeps a log of high scores, score-attack players will find much to like



Players hoping to keep on top of the *Kingdom Hearts* plot are advised to play through the GBA instalment *Chain Of Memories* first, as many of the themes and characters presented in that title are continued here

But it is. The X-on-everything approach will see a determined player sail through the game's softly-pitched default difficulty level and perhaps rightly so. Ultimately, this is a children's game drawing upon children's worlds, and any more complexity would somehow undermine the source material's purpose. As a result, the plot is painted in broad, black-and-white brush strokes and each stage is formed from simple tasks which precede each ostensibly complex but inherently basic boss battle. Were it not for the rich, recognisable and beloved settings that fall over themselves to get to the player, this would be a desperately bland game.

But the power of those settings simply cannot be brushed aside. From Steamboat Willy's black-and-white level through Pirates Of The Caribbean's crackling salty skies, the scenarios are utterly compelling, the character designs timeless, the voice acting delightful and Square Enix's talent for solidly transporting personality from celluloid to polygon proves powerfully compelling. While the spectre of those opening scenes is never quite exorcised, each themed world drives the player on to the next, resulting in a kind of fast-food gaming that never feels truly satisfying but is nevertheless sustaining and absolutely addictive. **[7]**


Sora, Donald and Goofy are thoughtfully adapted for each of Disney's worlds they visit. In the Lion King level Sora takes on the appearance of a small, dark lion cub while, in the Little Mermaid's kingdom, Goofy becomes a turtle, reflecting his defensive qualities







NINETY-NINE NIGHTS

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: ¥7,149 (£35) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (US/UK)
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: PHANTAGRAM/Q ENTERTAINMENT PREVIOUSLY IN: E158

Ninety-Nine Nights deserves a better score than the one at the bottom of this page. That's a strange way to put it, but it comes from the fact that its most grating flaws occur at such a fundamental level that it's a mystery they were ever tolerated at all. Stages in this crowd-combat game can easily last for half an hour if play is cautious – a necessity at some points, given the ludicrous lumps that some enemies can hack out of energy bars, and the floods of bodies that gather onscreen – with absolutely no checkpoints in place. Losing a half-hour's play is utterly galling and a very effective deterrent, one that's doubly unforgivable given the technology at hand; even *Dynasty Warriors 2* handed the player save points, albeit clumsily. Is it really too much to ask for?

Mid-battle cutscenes are inexplicably rude, too. Often, the arrival of a fresh squad will trigger one of the many short scenes that show them pouring on to the battlefield. If you're in the middle of a triple-figure combo or a vital special attack when the cinematic starts, then it's brought to a jarring halt and your energy simply lost.



Music is context-sensitive, fading out when there are no enemies in sight, a touch that proves surprisingly effective. *N3*'s audio work feels weak, however, mostly due to the lack of a riotous cacophony as the player is swarmed by enemies



The player takes two squads of allied troops into combat, to be given basic commands. They prove to be supremely ineffective in battle, only serving to thicken the scrum and distract larger enemies. It means there's more for you to kill, but gets irritating when a handful of stragglers need to be mopped up

These schoolboy oversights feel especially severe since *N3* manages to graduate the riot 'em up in a number of significant ways. Unquestionably, it offers some of the greatest combo-streaks yet to grace a slugfest. As each character levels up, their repertoire of X/Y button chains expands, resulting in some truly vivacious attack sequences that would pass for the supreme money shot in other similar games, with each salvo of launchers, spins and dazzling swipes cutting the air with beautifully glassy weapon traces.

N3 may owe as much of a debt to Koei's *Dynasty Warriors* as it does to Phantagram's own *Kingdom Under Fire*, but it does set out a worthy stall for games like *Ni-Oh* to try to best. While environments can easily be tracked back to *KUF*, *N3* has a good eye for spectacle and battle direction, with squads trickling down distant hills or spilling directly into view down a canyon's walls. Combined with the gratuitous flamboyance of the ultimate attacks (see 'Thrill kill'), and flair of the dramatic design, the overall effect can be spectacular – however unkind the lip-synching in cutscenes can sometimes be.

The hypnotic rattle of combat means this may well be the truest rhythm-action game that Mizuguchi has been involved with, but it's also the most careless. It's a stunted epic, but one that Microsoft would do very well to nurture. Or, at least, restrain a little more strictly, if only to prevent it from stabbing itself in the foot so recklessly in future. **[6]**







The onscreen throng gets messy quickly (above), but the camera is easily adjusted to offer a higher view. Not that this helps, since the player character merges into the crush of bodies, marked out only by outrageous attacks. The tremendous draw distance (left) is thickly blurred, but what's lost in clarity is gained in grandeur, with distant battles and incoming enemies hazily visible

Thrill kill



Fallen enemies release red souls, and collecting enough of these charges up a character's special attack, resulting in a typical outburst of carnage. Where *N3* goes one better, though, is that enemies downed with this powerful assault then drop blue souls, which very slowly fill a secondary special bar. Using this – and you'll often only get the chance once or twice per stage – unleashes a spell of enormous power, instantly murdering every opponent in the vicinity with a shower of lethal lasers, or a series of ground quakes that slam whole battalions of bodies into the air. While undoubtedly effective, some of these attacks can take effect in a literally hit and miss manner; regardless, having one halted by an intrusive mini-cutscene is a uniquely cruel gatecrash.



Enthusiastic weather effects keep the heat on your CPU even on rare occasions when there's nothing blowing up. The clouds and blizzards do a good job of hiding the simplicity of the world, as long as you don't stop to inspect it



Mapping the standard RPG character classes on to vehicles is only partially successful; while tank and medic classes benefit, the sluggishness of stealth makes it hugely unpopular in a game that makes a virtue of speed





AUTO ASSAULT

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 (£9/MONTH SUBSCRIPTION)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: NCSOFT
DEVELOPER: NETDEVIL PREVIOUSLY IN: E154, E160

Max power



Both driver and vehicle are customised from the outset, and the latter can receive further attention on the road. Upgraded engines, armour, bodywork and weapons can all be produced by refining accumulated junk and combining it using a few basic skillsets, and there's also the option of buying another model when your cash and skill reserves are high enough. There's not much scope for distinction, though: different classes are constrained to different vehicles, and while there's a healthy number of different combinations it lacks the modding flair you'd find in a dedicated street-racer.

As spectacle, *Auto Assault* is an undoubted success. A game whose intention is simple – to bring people together online and let them drive cars and shoot guns at things – needed an elaborate world full of noise and fury, and the Havok-powered maps are a commendable vision of unending, explosive destruction. All but the most substantial buildings collapse into rubble as the air fills with gunfire from the players and heavily armed residents that swarm around them. Participation requires the bare minimum of finesse – the limitless ammunition, auto-tracking weapons and free healing strip away any hesitation from each new encounter, and from the earliest stages there's little cause to lift your finger from the trigger or the pedal from the floor.

It's a welcome trade-off for less effective presentation elsewhere, with the fundamentally primitive design well concealed in the blur of speed and the perpetual smoke, and does an enviable, if unsophisticated, job of disguising the statistical grind. But having grabbed your attention, it fails to hold it. An appealing crafting system, based around the detritus automatically harvested from the ruins, languishes almost totally unexplained, and there is little encouragement to tap the rewards on offer.

The lack of a central trading system limits potential for social interaction already reduced by the ability – and often necessity, due to the currently sparse population – to face the typically repetitive quests alone. Convoy incentives are meagre and rarely taken up, guilds share little more than a chat channel, and while PVP options are available, it's not until the higher levels that things really take off.

Even the pedestrian cities are small, near-silent and chronically underpopulated, a handful of NPCs perched unmoving on street corners awaiting a crowd of players who have yet to arrive. Outside, roaming the stretches of featureless wasteland that connect endless, constantly-regenerating ruins, the overwhelming sensation is of scattered groups fighting lone battles. It's appropriate for a world ravaged by nuclear holocaust, but a planet of Omega Men has limited appeal as an MMO. The short-term gratification is gradually diminished by too-obvious regeneration of the damage you cause, and there's not enough variety of experience to sustain a monthly subscription.

It's in need of some race tuning, too. The ceaseless pyrotechnics require far too much hardware support, demanding a PC well in excess of the minimum specification to run smoothly, but even at maximum detail there's still a grating crudeness whenever you're moving slowly enough to notice. After-market modification will doubtless address this in time, but for now *Auto Assault* is a vision of the future where society has crumbled to the point where nobody feels the need to restart it, and that's a loneliness far better suited to singleplayer. **[5]**



The narrative gets a lush introduction but falters once in the game, doled out in text form by your various quest-givers. Ever with an eye on those with short attention spans, goals are highlighted so you don't have to read *all* of it, should the urge to get driving prove too much







Vehicles offer the same uncomplicated glee as the battles, offering statistical readouts and bonuses for elaborate jumps. Performance is tuned for the sandpit rather than simulator



Live enabled pin fall and submission matches for one to four players make up *Roses'* event roster, alongside *Tekken*-style street bouts whose novelty appeal is negligible



RUMBLE ROSES XX

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: $60 (£35) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), JUNE (UK)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: YUKES



With no real story mode to top and tail, *Roses* makes its entrance sequences the cinematic main event. Free of inconvenient user input, their choreography justifies their load times

Commonly exiled from the moral high ground and banished to a safely coy distance, *Rumble Roses* hasn't had much of a chance to make a name for itself. If it had, it might have become known as fighter that's indulgent rather than cynical and competent rather than crude. *Smackdown* developer Yukes knows what it's doing in the squared circle, although as is immediately evident from the screenshots, its efforts here are only half concerned with the science of wrestling.

XX plays a dangerous game with its audience, the facets of which can take several hours to emerge. It does a great job of suggesting itself incapable of imposing a logical, balanced structure on a singleplayer career, taking and creating opportunities to hamper progress for the sake of longevity. But that, together with the tease tactics with which it's achieved, is key to the game's design. A world map offers various match types and venues, but little clue as to what can be gained from each victory. The fact that championship matches – the key first steps to unlocking alter-ego characters – are so elusive suggests some form of method, but trying to decipher the patterns of play and achievement required to trigger them is exhausting.

The apparent goal isn't so much to protract the treasure-hunting process as break it entirely. The more you attempt to apply the traditional practice of complete and repeat, the more the game confounds. Approaching it purely as a peer of *Smackdown*, *King Of Colosseum* or *Giant Gram* isn't just unflattering – suggesting it to be a skeletal ignoramus, sparse in traditional content and simple in AI – but inappropriate. Like it or not, *XX* is a lavish exhibition of male-targeted dress-up dolls Its eastern vices of submission and coercion may well unsettle the chaste, but its delivery is sumptuous. Skills with shaders may still be developing, but it's remarkable how deftly Yukes has risen to the task of wrapping plastic pants around plasticised posteriors.

Boasting move-sets with a *Def Jam*-style snap and crackle, *XX* ably downplays such issues as inconsistent clipping and missed link animations. This, together with a buxom body of costumes, photoshoot poses, online functionality and penalty games (see 'Chortle combat') lies at the heart of its charm. A capable wrestler with grapple and defence systems kept basic yet comparatively fair (the former recognising a four-way selection of follow-up moves and the latter a pairing of first-to-the-button strikes and reversals), it's knowingly superficial, with rings and match types largely devoid of gimmicks and a title road empty of narrative or surprise events.



Feisty and unapologetic, it's a game that's happy to break the resolve of those who fail to accept its rules: play casual and complete at leisure. A love/hate slow-burner with room for improvement, *XX* possesses one unarguable quality: it's obsessed with the ladies, but it sure has some balls. **[6]**

Chortle combat



Thrusting so hard into *DOAX* territory that it punctures the other side, *Roses'* Queens matches combine voyeurism and comedy with unabashed gusto. The penalties faced by losers of these sun-drenched singles matches are plentiful, gradually unlocked and chosen at the outset, ranging from an oil massage (above) to poolside cleaning and three quietly outrageous limbo dances. Some are better conceived than others, though really their humour is so disposable (and arguably incidental to their prime purpose) that once your eyebrow has settled you'll find yourself skipping past them. Like most of the game's events, they eventually yield additional rewards such as swimwear, more credible ring attire and special bonuses such as Eva's outfit from *Metal Gear Solid 3*.



Even in games that pretend their voluptuous character models are mere window-dressing (*Roses* continues to enjoy a lack of such conceit), the photo mode never lies. Though sometimes superfluous, the many options here that dictate how pictures can be taken, viewed and shared make for an attractive overall showcase that should test Japan's Xbox 360 phobia



Tomisaka City is convincingly cohesive and overwhelming even when split into smaller, more navigable chunks. Underscored by the reuse of locations by subsequent characters, its traumatic decay is an awesome experience









Water was the first game's sparsest resource, but the flood now makes heat the most precious commodity. A satisfied sigh and steam cloud end shivering treks toward barrel fires





Vehicles play a larger role than in the first game, with large patches of submersed land no longer accessible by foot. They're no shelter from the cold or the damp, though, and players will continually have to watch their health level even in the relative safety of a boat



ZETTAI ZETSUMEI TOSHI 2: ITETSUITA KIOKU TACHI

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,070 (£30)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: IREM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Small relief



Whether by way of its ridiculously mismatched scavenged clothing, a pair of Groucho glasses, cupped-hand screams in the face of tragedy or taking a quick break from ensuing calamity to hunt for a playboy bunny girl compass, Irem gives players every opportunity to comically undercut the drama. It's a testament to the developer's literary confidence, and the game's twists remain suitably shocking, even if they are acted out in banana-yellow spandex and a chef's hat.

It has to be said up front: for all its accomplishments – its unique scenario, its re-imagining of survival horror on purely mundane terms, its tongue-in-cheek drama – the first *Zettai* (released in the west as *SOS: The Final Rescue*), whether justly or not, will forever be synonymous with the staggeringly lows its framerate could reach. Sadly, despite the glimmer of hope brought by a series of delays, the same problem still threatens to overshadow its sequel, which, ironically, buckles most under the weight of rendering precisely the stuff it's made of: water. Set in a newly constructed below-ground city, an out-of-season Christmas Eve downpour causes the entire area to collapse and sink under the rising flood. Constantly in search of higher ground, players must also remain on the lookout for sources of warmth to dry out their clothes and stave off hypothermia.



Each individual plotline offers some subtle twist on the traditional disaster formula, like this tastefully implemented sneaking section that accompanies a break-out from a crumbling prison block. Each not only serves its storyline, but ensures a fresh angle on each chapter

Seemingly aware of its mechanical reach exceeding its grasp, Irem has instead pushed this sequel forward in more attainable and controllable areas. Though the game's initial, and longest, segment comfortably retreads familiar ground for series followers – a pair of strangers whose single enemy is the environment they traverse – from there it blossoms into a meticulously-crafted pastiche of interwoven and intersecting plotlines looping through the same Christmas Day disaster. Its cast of playable characters – the waiter, the wrongly-accused prisoner, the unwitting but wise cabbie, the tormented teenage schoolgirl and the amnesiac who quite literally pieces together fragments of his own lost identity – all are variously aware of, or oblivious to, the role they play both in each others' lives.

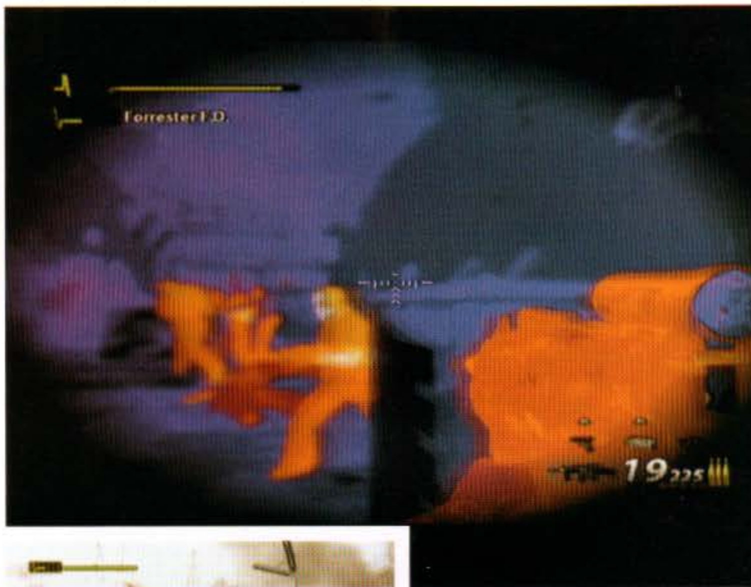
Those simple devices – the intricacies of its play on time and on its overlapping locations – make it an enduringly fascinating experience. Witnessing the broken aftermath of some structural trauma in one chapter and then causing it in the next, seeing a previously played character as an anonymous background extra from the vantage point of your current one, that sudden realisation that you were *right there* the whole time, all give the game exactly the hook it needs to overcome its technical shortcomings.

As an adventure, it still abides by the same tightly scripted rules as its predecessor. Certain plot points can branch the game outward in separate directions (usually to comic effect, like prematurely ending a chapter in an selfish act of self-preservation rather than helping others in need), but by and large the game remains a linear thread of set pieces, freeing you to explore the immediate surroundings but confining you with strict triggers that guide you on to the next. Nonetheless, for its dramatic and cinematic flair, its lovingly crafted chaotic destruction and above all its network of interconnected personalities, it's an adventure that shouldn't be missed. **[7]**





The riot shield hampers your movement, and taking fire forcefully knocks you back; it dictates a quick-quick-slow rhythm that suits console FPS control particularly well, and paradoxically heightens the sense of physical danger



The thermal breather is necessary to get through the thick smoke in burning buildings, but its heat-imaging makes it an invaluable tactical aid, especially when combined with a smoke grenade. Tools like these – not the standard-issue firearms – set the game apart

URBAN CHAOS: RIOT RESPONSE

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: NOW
PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E158

Hot on *Black*'s trail of spent cartridges comes this similarly raw console shooter from the fledgling Rocksteady Studios. It's the more modest and less polished game by far – a cheerfully rude and crude straight-to-video potboiler to *Black*'s blockbuster spectacle – but, for a while at least, it's a similarly solid thrill. And arguably, thanks to its riot shield and law-enforcement theme, a more imaginative one.

Urban Chaos' set-up is as brash as the lurid video newscasts that explain it between levels. In a city not unlike New York, at a time not unlike now, the uncontrollable rise of masked arsonist gang the Burners has led to the formation of T-Zero, a controversial anti-gang unit authorised to respond with lethal force. As T-Zero officer Nick Mason, you play through ten short, histrionic scenarios in ten successive months, as the unit turns the tide of popular support and the Burners get suspiciously better organised and equipped. Typically, each level will involve working with the support of firemen, paramedics and police, defusing a hostage scenario and arresting a gang leader using your stun gun.

Although *Urban Chaos* is on a very, very small scale compared to its peers, for most of its length it makes the most of its meagre acreage of run-down, inner-city real estate. Scripted incidents punch through the backtracking, and the pacing and variation of objectives keep the tempo up. Meanwhile, since near-total cover – in the form of your riot shield – is just a trigger-pull away, enemy accuracy and aggression are necessarily high, so every inch of ground won counts. The structure works too, with weapon upgrades and terse, frantic bonus levels being awarded for specific achievements (headshots, non-lethal arrests, simple item-hunting) rather than general progress: a real encouragement to wring the best from the action.

As concise and convincing as it can be, elsewhere Rocksteady's economising is distinctly thrift-shop: the thin ranks of indistinguishable enemies, their two-step tactics and the dispiriting, rushed damp squib of an ending, clearly two levels too soon. The emergency services support is paper-thin: you only ever command one unit to follow, take cover or perform one context-sensitive action; paramedics are pure health packs and police are of more tactical use if left to their own devices. Firemen, however, though hardly more sophisticated, provide moments of cheesy, chest-swelling heroism as they break open doors and carry unconscious civilians through choking infernos.

That's what this game does best: tiny moments of gratifying, low-rent drama that hit home with all the force of a bullet against your riot shield. Those moments are mounted in competent, hugely physical combat, and a heady atmosphere of panic that's rammed home with the entertaining semi-satire of a Paul Verhoeven film. But the riot never breaks out, the fire never spreads. *Urban Chaos* ultimately doesn't have the reach to deliver what it promises, and ends up retreating into cliché. A few months more, a few dollars more and this could have made a much more defiant stand. **[6]**





Like much of *Urban Chaos*, the hostage situations are effective in dramatic terms but without much substance or challenge – just wait it out behind your shield and snipe at the appointed, slow-mo moment



Within admittedly very compact confines, Rocksteady's art team has created some of the most credible urban landscapes ever to appear in a game. The weather-beaten textures and washed-out colours are perfect, the architecture is to scale and actually makes sense, and the seasonal effects are subtle and startlingly evocative

Over-achiever



Across its handful of levels and four rather close difficulty settings, *Urban Chaos* boasts a frightening 200 achievement medals. Non-lethal takedowns with the stun gun are a simple matter of timing and target selection, and the game is generous, not to say gratuitous, with headshots; these are both entertaining medals to go for, though, the challenge coming from the numbers required in later levels. Hunting for hidden masks is a tedious and out-of-character bit of legwork by comparison. Thankfully, unlike so many such reward systems, the medals tangibly feed back into the game by unlocking satisfying and valuable upgrades.





No doubt informed by *Sniper Elite*, Gunnar's scope is better designed than most. Besides upgradable levels of zoom, if features a foggy area of peripheral vision useful for tracking



ROGUE TROOPER

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PRICE: £40 (PS2, XBOX), £30 (PC) PUBLISHER: EIDOS
DEVELOPER: REBELLION PREVIOUSLY IN: E159



Details such as allowing tutorial pop-ups to be completely deactivated by the returning player, the HUD to be faded for less intrusive guidance, the most momentary of cutscenes skipped with a button press and companion dialogue reduced to essential status reports are persuasively considerate

Personnel carrier



Provided their bio-chips are hacked from their corpse in a timely fashion, there's no more dangerous GI than a dead one, as Rogue's companions confirm. When he isn't providing an intelligent reticule or multi-level zoom, Gunnar (implanted in Rogue's rifle) can act as an unattended sentry cannon, setting up ambushes and flanking manoeuvres. Helm (Rogue's helmet) can conjure a holographic decoy GI and decode electronic locks while you fight. Bagman (Rogue's backpack), meanwhile, is at the heart of a unique inventory that recycles scrap from fallen soldiers and junk piles into ammo, health and upgrades. It's a novel idea, rolling a few common gaming devices into one mobile solution with its own strategic requirements.

Rogue Trooper is hardly about to trigger a new videogame gold rush. Rebellion's series of 2000AD games, kicked off by the valiant but flawed *Dredd Vs Death*, has found itself at the mercy of an old guard of gaming comic fans – not the most lucrative or assured of markets. But if revivals can be inspired by sheer force of enthusiasm, then this deserves to trigger one. Marking the fourth major return to roots (as well as the third videogame) for a series plagued by continuity hiccups, it's an origin story that walks a straight but enjoyable line through some of the Genetic Infantryman's halcyon days.

Designed not so much by checklist as by judicious reference to both source and target media, this thirdperson actioner spikes the familiar with flavour, and a tired but reliable vocabulary of wall-hugs, circle-strafes, grenade lobs and headshots with an invigorating Nu-Earth twang. No cliché goes unattended, and as a result you're dropped into an absorbing world of grumbling Nort grunts, over-sized flak batteries that drum the burning skies, and Blackmare tanks the size of bungalows. Staged beneath a skybox that brings as much instant character as that of *Halo*, *Rogue Trooper* demonstrates an insight into the original material that such adaptations seldom enjoy.

That isn't enough to bolster a game that wears its run-and-gun simplicity on its sleeve, of course, but neither is it alone in marking the lengths to which Rebellion has gone. Rogue and his bio-chip comrades have clearly been recruited for their great potential as a modular videogame hero, and little of that has been wasted. Gradually introduced throughout the game's opening third, the many tricks this unit has up its sleeve (see 'Personnel carrier') are more than entertaining enough to justify a return trip. That journey, however, is more a daytrip than an assault course, since the enemy AI only really poses a threat when charging in great numbers or deploying certain troublesome weapons. As its frequent mounted gun segments confirm, this isn't a taut battle of wits any more than it is a genre revolution.



Having seen the Asura technology come this far through years of labour, we'd hope to see Rebellion continue its evolution with a more ambitious AD title on 360 or PS3

But it is a remembrance, and for those that share the memory it's a vivid, diligent and arresting one. A powerhouse performance from Rebellion's Asura engine yields a slick Rogue avatar that bounds through unerring visions of the blasted Quartz Zone, Nort-occupied Nu Paree and the septic Orange Sea among others. Company composer Tom Bible brings another tenebrous electronic score, and first-rate voiceovers extend from principal to supporting cast. Multiplayer modes support both bots and online opponents in a handful of bespoke environments, their siege and conquest scenarios suitably thrill-powered, if ultimately limited.

Those picking up *Rogue Trooper* will probably know that the Traitor General can't be vanquished in a single game, but will find in Rebellion's achievement justice of a different kind. Having cleared the name of its 2000AD endeavours, the question for the studio now is if the niche they have made their own can sustain rather than stifle them. **[7]**





Not only does the breathing tank of a Nort soldier betray its position via ejected wisps of gas, but a single bullet will turn it into a fiery ragdoll jetpack. It's an MO that never tires



As a member of a race of shapeshifters, your warrior can take bestial form for a set duration, increasing speed and attack power, but with such a diverse line of alternate attacks it's frequently easy to forget the option even exists





UNTOLD LEGENDS: THE WARRIOR'S CODE

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£35) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), JUNE (UK)
PUBLISHER: SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E159

Even above the whirr and click of the UMD drive, you can hear the gears turning. It's the sound of SOE's machinations moving tirelessly to turn what at first was a relatively impassive dungeon hack into a franchise. Where *Brotherhood Of The Blade* limply draped a narrative over its satisfyingly proficient mechanics, *The Warrior's Code* wants to elaborate; it wants to you to know its lore; it wants you to flip through its bestiary and know its creature's individual quirks; it wants you to remember it by name. Character is what separates this from the original, and while it still falls short of lending true purpose and pathos to your quest, even a small dose of personality goes a long way in engaging you with its world.

Functionally, though, *Warrior's* marked improvement is in its streamlining, which neatly nips and tucks away the frayed edges that marred the first. The palette on to which all equipment was previously scattered has now been stacked, sorted and compartmentalised by item, neatly stripping the chore out of stock-taking. While still comprised of an interlocking set of overworld and dungeon pieces, gone too are the frequent memory-bending hunts to re-locate previously seen locations, thanks to scenario-specific maps that let players instantly warp to and from landmark points as you move through the game's tightly-woven story.

This frees up all remaining attention for the combat, and unfortunately it's here that the light shines through the seams. In every instance that *Brotherhood* practised careful restraint in order to retain its single, driving focus, *Warrior's Code* shifts and itches to show off all its new tricks. From a simple but respectable selection of one ranged and meleé attack and two magic attacks, *Warrior's Code* has bullied its way on to every remaining free button on the PSP's face with charged attacks, six concurrent selections of magic attacks, showy attacks of opportunity, shape-shifting attacks, all of which – as welcome as customisation and the freedom for varying play styles might be – in the end only muddle the experience and. What's worse, they rarely prove more effective or necessary in single play than the repetitive one-note mash that defines the genre.

Its renewed mission structure, too, comes off worse for the improvement. Whether dreaded escort missions pairing you with entirely useless partners (or over-ambitious ones that don't know their own weakness), hunts to destroy specific unmarked camps, or timed escape-the-area dashes, for all the momentary and refreshing thrills the new introductions bring, they ultimately feel at odds with the game's underlying structure, and never fully cohere into a graceful whole.

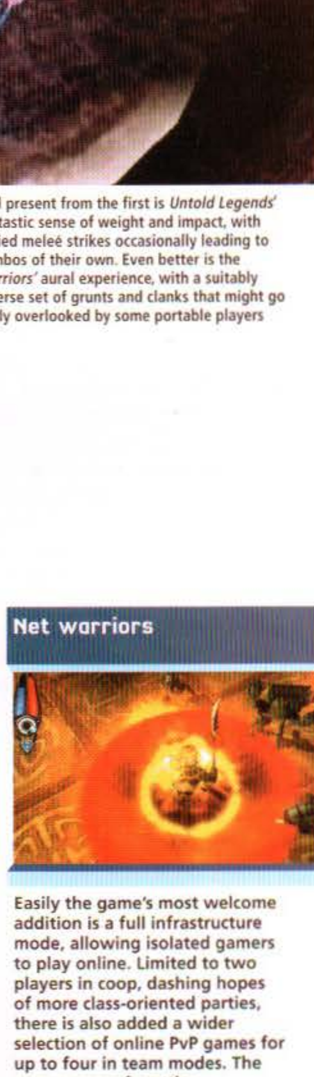
In its race to improve upon itself, *The Warrior's Code* essentially has forgotten when to say no. Pulling itself outward in every direction at once, it stretches thin where it should be richest: at its core. **[6]**



Charge a successful attack of opportunity during an enemy's recovery time and your warrior will spring melodramatically toward the screen and come down with a quake and a chance to knock free some loot

Still present from the first is *Untold Legends'* fantastic sense of weight and impact, with varied meleé strikes occasionally leading to combos of their own. Even better is the *Warriors'* aural experience, with a suitably diverse set of grunts and clanks that might go sadly overlooked by some portable players

Net warriors



Easily the game's most welcome addition is a full infrastructure mode, allowing isolated gamers to play online. Limited to two players in coop, dashing hopes of more class-oriented parties, there is also added a wider selection of online PvP games for up to four in team modes. The games range from the traditional, like capture the flag, to timed loot-hording. Though the latter amount to little more than tight arenas filled with constantly spawning hordes of enemies, it's a welcome new feature and smooths out many of the rough edges of *Brotherhood*'s multiplayer.



Though *Warrior's Code* sports a more broadly-divided class system, not all choices, such as this lithe Scout, are equally recommended for first time solo play. Ranged weapons aren't always feasible options with an ever-advancing opponent, and under-defended classes can find they are quickly overwhelmed





GENERATION OF CHAOS

FORMAT: PSP **PRICE:** $40 (£23) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NIPPON ICHI STUDIOS **DEVELOPER:** IDEA FACTORY



PS1-strength sprites litter the battlefield, while generals are represented by superior 2D artwork in the menus. Several dozen troop types are available, from water-loving frogmen to undead knights whose power thrives in fights that take place after sundown. The weather also has an influence on battle

When *Disgaea* decided to rewrite the strategy RPG rulebook it used a *lot* of ink, but never enough to stick the pages together. *Generation Of Chaos*, however, has made a bit of a mess, scribbling all over the margins and leaving numerous crossings out. It's a grid- and turn-based game, one whose range of options is initially bewildering – almost paralysing – presenting the player with a world map screen that's littered with three-letter abbreviations that demand the manual be kept to hand for the first hour or so. And even then, it feels like an FAQ is an essential companion to convey the game's depths and compensate for the initially garbled interaction.

Players take control of a number of troops and buildings scattered across the game's landscape, moving units and directing finances. Although a great deal of the apparent complexity reveals itself to be nothing but clumsiness, it still crams in plenty of resource management elements: the land itself can be terraformed, albeit ponderously, buildings fortified and economies managed through wages and loyalty gifts. With each round of play allowing just a handful of actions, spreading these tasks out well is disappointingly unwieldy.

When a battle finally kicks off – a scrum of slow-moving sprites consisting of troops and a commander for each side – there's still awkwardness. Your abilities as a director are limited to a handful of orders that result in fuzzy-feeling control, while units often display pathfinding issues. Still, beneath all that flummoxing fluster, there's still an engaging conflict to be had, even if it's a sticky one. Indeed, the battles are so extensive that it's best to digest them a few rounds at a time, making the game a perfect fit for the host hardware – especially with a persistently available save function. But there is a PSP-specific sluggishness to it, thanks to numerous disc access moments and the need to swap between the D-pad and stick for efficient navigation.

Ultimately, the momentum needed to truly get *Generation Of Chaos* in motion is an enormous commitment, and it's a game that just – only just, by the skin of those teeth that need to be pulled – manages to offer enough of a reward to make the investment worthwhile. **[5]**



Battles are buffered by the use of items and magic, with 'support' attacks becoming available as the scuffles progress. Defeated enemy generals are taken prisoner; a drain on cash, these characters can be set free, coerced into changing sides or simply executed



SAMURAI CHAMPLOO

FORMAT: PS2 **PRICE:** $40 (£22) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (US, JAPAN) TBA (UK) **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO BANDAI
DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE

On the surface it's a licensing agreement made in heaven. Anime hit Champloo, whose anachronistic Edo-era samurai adventures have made it a natural successor to the cool charms of Cowboy Bebop, was never going to have been an easy fit for a conventionally-minded game studio. And, while it may not yet have proven itself as the go-to studio for a lone swordsman slasher, *Killer 7* has given Grasshopper instant pedigree for audacious genre-defying experimentation. And so, given a series defined by its soundtrack and its special blend of feudal hip-hop culture, Suda Goichi and his team have done an artful job implementing both elements as an essential part of the design document for this exuberant button masher. Played out through the interlocking storylines of rogue heroes Mugen and Jin, each fighter's combo tree is defined by the beats of collectible vinyl singles, mixed freely with a flick of an analogue stick fader. Stock up at a record shop before going into battle and you can phase between soundtracks as you phase between combo patterns.

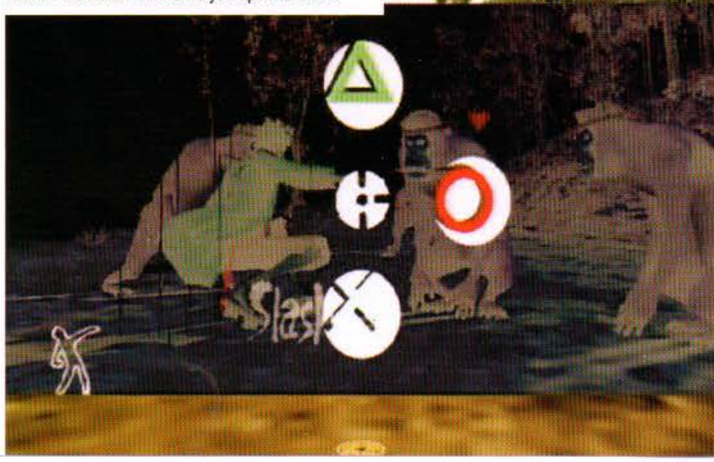
As an experience, it's rightfully spectacular. Between its turntablist interface, the driving focus of its incidental music and the studio's signature dazzling graphical flair that punctuates its counter system and tate mode, it's a steady and relentless source of quick-cut eye candy. But taken strictly as a game, it's an example of style not so much over substance, but over execution. Its combat, an endless stream of self-consciously designed – even farcical – combos that never offer a real sense of mastery, is a waste of the promise of its record-flipping contrivance. So lazily implemented are the selector mechanics that differentiation in value between individual tracks (apart from personal preference) is achieved by tacking on a simple status bonus for the rarest songs rather than offering upgraded fighting technique.

Couched in fixed-camera locales whose nature is as stiff and inorganic as cardboard-cut dioramas, and whose city life is little more than idly animated statuettes, *Champloo* can often feel as hastily constructed as many other games-of-the-anime. Were it not for its creative direction's admirable job of filling in its patchy mechanics' gaps it would be entirely skippable. With those gaps filled it's a charming, if flawed, achievement. **[6]**



By raising your tension level, represented by a increasingly frenetic *Beatmania*-ripped dancing man, players enter the frantic button-mashing tate mode. Hitting 100 slashes within the time limit will get you to the appropriately-named trance mode, a rave-time silhouetted bonus game

Simultaneous attacks are handled with a slow-motion reaction-time minigame. Pressing a randomly selected corresponding face button will unleash a solid counterattack, but missing the beat or the button will leave you open to the hit





LOST MAGIC

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: TAITO

It's a wonder – and a relief – that there aren't more DS games like *Lost Magic*: brimful of ideas, gripped by touch fever, yet let down by clumsy, archaic execution and a sort of stealth conservatism that all but crushes out its novelty. The spirit is willing to join Nintendo's revolution, but the flesh is weak.

Lost Magic has the trappings of an action-RPG, but mixes this genre with realtime strategy and creature collection, and then serves the whole in tart, tough and tiny bite-size servings. The plot has been ground out of the fairytale treadmill: Isaac, unwitting son of a great sage, is entrusted with his father's wand when the latter succumbs to a sorceress. Isaac must then reunite the six wands of the six schools of magic (earth, wind, fire, water, light and dark) to restore peace to the world, and eradicate a deeply unsurprising plague of experience-yielding monsters, rogue mages and animated mushrooms.

More surprising is that Isaac's spells are cast by drawing runes on the touchscreen, an involving twist that's been smartly exploited. The speed and accuracy of your sketch determine the spell's power, and many spells can be discovered by combining pairs of runes, so you won't have to memorise tens of symbols or wait for them to be dispensed by the designers. The underlying system of opposing elemental magics is also a sound, if straightforward, one.

Isaac can trap and command – typically in three groups of three – almost any monster he meets. These, like Isaac himself, are directed with an ostensibly sensible tap-and-point system, but thanks to the units' torpid pace, appalling pathfinding and tendency to stand in each other's way, negotiating the compact maps and pacy combat is like trying to embroider silk with a greasy knitting needle.

This is typical of the sense of uncomfortable constriction that pervades *Lost Magic*: of what ought to be a leisurely and distinctive adventure squeezed into self-consciously tight handheld clothing. You'll constantly trip up on the five-to-ten-minute time limits, shallow health and mana reserves, and intense playing style, only to fall face-first into a yet another lengthy, maddeningly unskippable cutscene of bland, button-nosed determination. In the end, though there is little average about either its elegant successes or its needless failings, between them they leave *Lost Magic* hanging in the balance. **[5]**



Lost Magic is light on items, focusing instead on the capture of crystals to regenerate mana and health. This will likely be crucial in local and online multiplayer modes, which may also make sense of the game's strangely condensed design



The drawings of art director Yoshiharu Sato, a Studio Ghibli veteran, have plenty of innocent appeal. But his characters aren't animated (or written) with the charisma of, say, Phoenix Wright



UNDER DEFEAT

FORMAT: DC PRICE: ¥5,800 (£28) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN)
PUBLISHER: G.REV DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Enemies killed by your option earn double points, and a bonus for picking up an option of the same type you currently have encourages you to stick to your guns



There is some slowdown in the game, particularly before a player's death. The juxtaposition of large player craft and small hit area can be confusing, especially when married with this slowdown

Another year, another Dreamcast shoot 'em up swansong. The underground hype and excitement that has surrounded this, *Border Down*'s younger cousin, does much to obscure the fact that it is a most straightforward expression of videogaming's eldest genre. There is just a single choice of helicopter gunship and the default *Ikaruga*-style gun cannot be upgraded. There is none of the 360° craft control of Psikyo's visually-similar *Zero Gunner 2*, and a mechanism whereby one of four different 'option' support ships can be deployed by your side for a few seconds only just lifts the system's complexity above so many '80s Japanese shooters. Indeed, the absence of bullet hell patterns (you draw all enemy fire) and the unwavering military style of enemy tanks and battleships gives the game a delightful old-school vertical shooter feel somewhere in between *Raiden* and *Twin Hawk*.

So, at first, players expecting an adrenaline rush of visual excitement building on the genre's recent refinements will be sorely disappointed with the unhurried pace and relative trickle of enemies. But that's not to say *Under Defeat* is not without contemporary flair. Borrowing some of *Border Down*'s tricks, the game unveils tougher end-of-level bosses the more lives you have lost, requiring score attack players to get down to their last life as soon as possible for the highest kudos. G.rev has also invested clear time and resources into the exuberant 3D explosions and smoke effects that punctuate each encounter and visually, especially though a VGA cable, the game looks crisp, if a little colourless.

However, the 45° top-down angle on the action does exacerbate the inevitable squeeze from vertical arcade monitor to horizontal television screen and this can occasionally be frustrating, especially to players that have been used to the space of playing the game in the arcade. Also, the lack of any meaningful unlocks other than more credits and artwork give the Dreamcast package a slight and ungenerous feel, relying instead solely on the game meat to give value for money. But this it does: *Under Defeat* is an unexpectedly large and satisfying game that, while often tortoise slow, plods on with determination. The meagre, slow release of extra credits forces a thoughtful learning curve that allows the game to reveal its charms in a steady, considered and ultimately very satisfying manner. **[6]**


P.N.03

TIME EXTEND

P.N.03

FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (PRODUCTION STUDIO 4)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2003**



The least successful of Capcom's GameCube hopes, does P.N.03's white lady deserve her reputation as the black sheep of the family?

To some, poor sales are almost a guarantee of probity – a coded message that invites the initiated to come inside and get devotional. Look at *Beyond Good and Evil*, say, or *Jet Set Radio Future*: they didn't hit the sales jackpot, but they struck a deep chord with certain players all the same. What's odd about Capcom's *P.N.03*, then, is that unlike other games that vanished at the point of retail, there are few people willing to speak up for it. Where are its devotees, its groupies, its cultists? Where are the websites, the fan fiction, the homebrew media player skins?

Maybe it's because *P.N.03* is awkward. Its controls make it awkward to play. Its commercial failure makes it awkward to track down in the shops. Crucially, the skewed challenge it presents makes its peculiar appeal very awkward to explain. This is a game that confounds on many fronts.

P.N.03 initially seems to have taken the concept of efficiency several steps too far: on first play, the game seems to be stuffed full of nothing

And yet, at first, everything looked so simple. The marketing hook is all in place. Vanessa Z Schneider: good look, great name. And the premise: run, jump and shoot. Nothing too controversial there. The setting seems a bit odd, perhaps – the game's location resembles a Mobius-strip reconfiguring of Frankfurt airport – but even that isn't too hard to explain away: it's just minimalist chic, design as Design, a coffee table game.

Directed by Shinji Mikami, creator of the *Resident Evil* series, *P.N.03* was one of the famous Capcom Five, and a comparison to another member of that group, *Viewtiful Joe*, proves illuminating. While both games have the same simple structure – play through levels, earn points with which to buy upgrades and continues – *P.N.03* emerges as the inverse of Clover studio's super-deformed cash cow. *Viewtiful Joe* is a comic book spending spree of variable-speed excess, a body-popping testament to cone fatigue. *P.N.03* is all about restraint – its levels look empty, its enemies designed to the absolute minimum. And while the expert *Joe* player makes a mess of the screen, a glorious sprawling slo-mo collision of colour and movement, excellence in *P.N.03* is marked, in direct contrast, by a quieter virtue: efficiency. One game asks you to be noisy and creative, the other asks you to be exacting and careful.

In fact, *P.N.03* initially seems to have taken the concept of efficiency several steps too far: on first play-through, the game seems to be stuffed full of nothing. Power-ups are scarce, secondary characters are entirely absent and the plot (killer robots, murdered parents and other science fiction placeholders) is intriguingly anemic. There are no lock-and-key puzzles or context-sensitive actions here – even door animations while moving between rooms have been excised as unnecessary. And then there are the limits imposed on the player. You cannot save within levels. You cannot turn quickly, except by executing a 180-degree spin on the spot. Most importantly, you cannot move and shoot at the same time – it's one or the other. Few titles have made so much out of what the player is not allowed to do. All games have rules, but in pursuit of stylised simplicity, *P.N.03* has gone one step further and resorted to actual restrictions.

The all-pervading sense of precision and poise makes the game's one terrible aesthetic slip all the more jarring. If any lead character ever reinforced Gordon Freeman's decision to go mute, it's Vanessa Schneider. For most of the game, she's above words,







THE CAPCOM FOUR

The early commercial failure of most of the Capcom Five titles had more to do with their exclusivity to the GameCube than any lack of quality. Sad, considering their emphasis on providing unexpected, focused, and idiosyncratic gaming experiences seems perfectly in-sync with their original hardware choice. *Resident Evil 4*, *Killer 7* and *Viewtiful Joe* would all eventually make an appearance on the PS2, with better sales. Only *P.N.03* would remain a Nintendo exclusive. The final game of the five, *Dead Phoenix* (below) – possessor of perhaps the most unintentionally apt title in recent memory – was cancelled before its completion, to pursue a career as a full-time internet rumour.



beyond them. Her hips are her vocabulary, and that arrogant raised shoulder and endlessly tapping finger say far more than dialogue ever could. And then, in the space of one cutscene, she speaks, and the elegantly empty vessel she once was is filled with bitter bile. Vanessa Schneider possesses a voice like an aging Weimar receptionist manning the desk for a second-hand car dealership. No wonder she kept her mouth shut for so long.

This blip aside, though, the *P.N.03* experience appears as one of cold, hard elegance – the sort of game people might sit inside glass boxes and play in the turbine hall at Tate Modern. Schneider moves and shoots and moves again. And that environment: cold, white, endless, unchanging. Enemy rubble dissolves, blast marks fade before your eyes, and all that lingers in the mind after play is the impression of simple contrast – black and white, white and black again.

Yet appearances will often deceive, and beneath the dark and light of which the game is composed, beneath the joyously pared-down aesthetic of cold gloss and brushed steel, a different kind of black and white emerges. This is not just a game of contrasts, it's a game *about* contrasts. But they're not the kind you'd expect – not the easy ones like good and evil or innocence and experience. This goes far deeper, bypassing narrative entirely to explore its themes somewhere between the screen and the player's hands.

While Schneider may slice through the air like an acrobat, skipping between bullets and sidestepping rockets, we on the other side of the television screen have to deal with the fact that she handles like a very old Buick. Her separate animations may be peerlessly graceful, but she moves between them in jagged bursts and in four simple directions only. Those elegant crouch and backflip displays are inversely proportional to the limited choice of movements. And it's this dichotomy that provides the true point of the game, *P.N.03*'s unspoken challenge: make Capcom's ballerina-shaped elephant really dance.

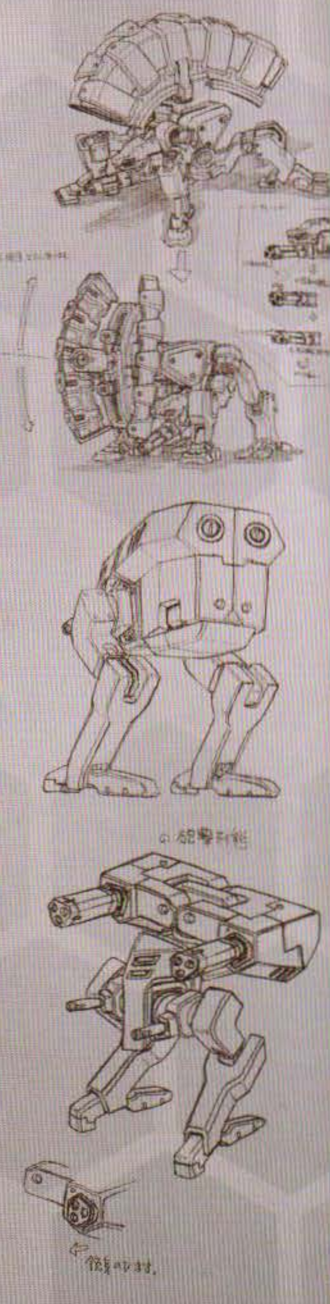
While Schneider may slice through the air like an acrobat, we on the other side of the screen have to deal with the fact she handles like a Buick

It's a challenge that not everyone has appreciated. Austere and inflexible, the design of *P.N.03* makes for a game that many players found unforgiving and lacking in pleasure. Played badly, the game is nasty, brutish and short – an unwieldy trip through over-stacked odds with a distinctly arbitrary feel to progression. Even the smallest slip is often punished heavily. However, when played well, *P.N.03* can become something else entirely – a finely tuned display of poise and forward planning.

Mastery is not as impossible as it initially seems. Although players can



Hours of practice will have you taking Schneider's lead and snapping out some 'beat' combos of your own, but the cycled animations and peculiarly awkward controls will lend them a staccato rhythm



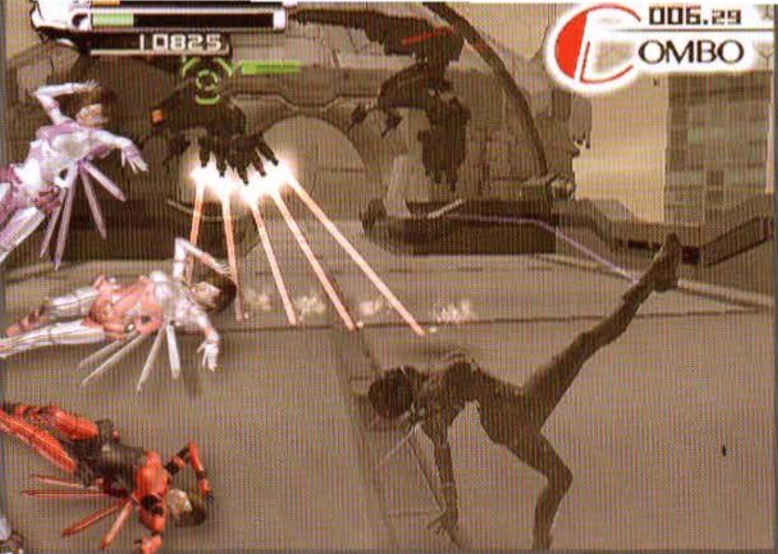






Having opened in a warm exterior, *P.N.03* quickly channels both its environment and players into a sterile network of tunnels and chambers, never shy of pulling the same annexes repeatedly from its bank





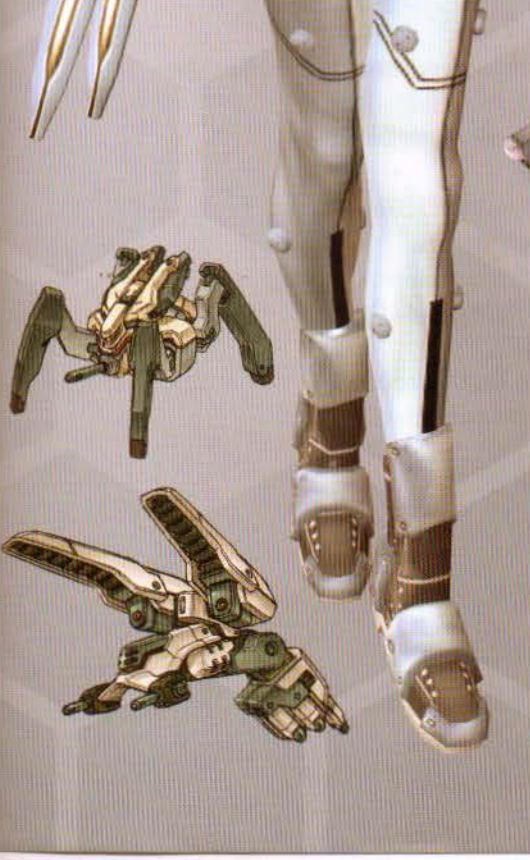


Frosty, professional and superpowered, Schneider can be seen as either a personification of this shooter's uncompromising style, or a wasted opportunity of immense proportions. A sequel doesn't seem likely



DEAD AGAIN

The emphatically old-school bosses come with punishingly long health bars and elaborate attack formations (and also boast names that make them sound not unlike brands of eastern European stereo equipment.) Defeating them requires patience and repeated continues. *P.N.03*'s controls can be particularly cruel on such occasions: it's perfectly possible to defeat the final boss Alraune, a vast gun-covered monster, after a marathon of well-timed ducks and pattern recognition, only to plummet to your death off a ledge afterwards due to the vagaries inherent in getting Schneider to walk in a straight line.



trade in points to buy upgrades such as greater firepower and extra health, the real upgrade takes place in the brain: the trick to staying alive in Schneider's world is to understand the way she works – and the way she works stands in direct contrast to the way most videogame avatars do.

On the surface, Schneider may echo countless other heroines – but her closest relative is actually a knight in chess. That quirky little item seems at first a useless mix of the cumbersome and the oddly precise, better at stepping around targets than into them. The knight is a piece that needs a warped – indeed, bent – logic to make it work at all. But a little practice reveals it to be a weapon of powerful insinuation: a gun that shoots around corners with unstoppable precision. Deadly whilst standing still and better at dodging and ducking than running and jumping, Schneider's limitations suggest their own path of least resistance. Instead of a battlefield, each room is more like a three-dimensional puzzle, and Schneider is custom-built to move through it – rolling and sidestepping along the most elegant and destructive line from one door to the next.

Enemies move in strict attack patterns that must be memorised, sounded for weak spots and then exploited. Triumph over them follows upon the understanding that, with practically no AI, they barely know Schneider is there at all. Her dexterity at ducking and hiding suddenly makes sense: find spots good for a few safe seconds of shooting, and pick enemies off in the best possible order. Due to the relentless techno soundtrack and Schneider's constant foot tapping, *P.N.03* is often mistaken for a rhythm action title, and while this isn't the case in the strictest sense, successful tactics still require the same emphasis on timing.

With this understanding, practice will eventually allow you to get the most out of Schneider, and the most out of *P.N.03*. Room after room of differing opponents presented in slightly shuffled combinations: while the pitch sounds like *Halo*, the implementation is closer to *Galaga: Combat Evolved*. It's somewhere between 'find a space, shoot, and repeat', that this most chilly of contemporary videogames develops the warm glow only a sense of synchronisation between player and machine can bring. With patterns learned and attack waves studied, it's possible to predict events with near-total accuracy, sidestepping and returning fire before the first volley has ceased. The sense of achievement is all the more keen because the challenge is so unfair, and the tools, at times, so purposefully inadequate.

P.N.03's dance of frustration culminates in the eventual realisation that the game's real mission – quite intentionally – is mastery of its own control system. The polar opposite of Mario and Zelda's invisible interface, getting to grips with Capcom's rules is *P.N.03*'s secret challenge and, perversely, its real appeal. Awkward, then, but still worthy of devotion.





THE MAKING OF... FLASHBACK

It may have been an offer no game developer could refuse, but Flashback was to prove that Delphine's real licence was for creativity

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **AMIGA** PUBLISHER: **US GOLD** DEVELOPER: **DELPHINE** ORIGIN: **FRANCE** RELEASE DATE: **1992**

In 1991, Delphine Software was a small but flourishing Parisian studio. Just three years old, it had already amassed a notable track record of original titles, with games like *Bio Challenge*, *Future Wars*, *Operation Stealth*, *Cruise For A Corpse* and *Another World*. But it was to take a very unexpected licence to provide the momentum for its best-known project: *Flashback*.

At the beginning of the year as **Paul Cuisset**, Delphine's founder, finished work on *Cruise For A Corpse*, the CEO of US Gold, Geoff Brown, made a proposition to Delphine Software's CEO Paul de Senneville. He had just bought the licence for The Godfather. Would the company be interested in developing the game? De Senneville was immediately enthusiastic, but Cuisset was more cautious: "The atmosphere of *Cruise* was retro and enclosed, and I was reluctant to go back to the same kind of environment. We wanted a modern background, with more space. So I suggested to Geoff that we transpose The Godfather's plot to the future."



Similar in character animation to Mechner's *Prince Of Persia*, the game also featured a familiar spread of instant-kill booby traps and bone-breaking plummets. Armed combat events were similarly treacherous

> "We wanted a modern background, with more space. So I suggested to Geoff that we transpose The Godfather's plot to the future"

Brown, surprisingly, approved the plan and Cuisset returned to Paris to write the story, starting work, along with fellow programmer Philippe Chastel, on a new approach that would allow him to build and play-test new ideas seamlessly. The project was going to require an evolution of Delphine's existing techniques as the decision had been made to release the game not just for the Amiga but also on the Mega Drive, a new challenge for computer specialist Delphine. The effort seemed worth it: Cuisset had been promised that the console market could bring millions of sales.

Strongly influenced by *Another World* and *Prince Of Persia*, Cuisset soon talked his enthusiastic art team, composed of Denis Mercier, Christian Robert and Thierry Perreau, into creating a fluid, dynamic character. After some quick-fire brainstorming, they came up with a rotoscoping technique to create the main character's animations. Without realising it, they were reproducing the technique used by the source of Cuisset's inspiration, Jordan Mechner: filming one of the team mimicking a few movements in front of a white wall, before 'acquiring' the images on computer for use in the game.

But that acquisition method was one of a kind: they ran the footage on a TV, frame by frame, and copied the figure's silhouette on a transparency taped to the screen. That transparency was then taped to the computer monitor, and the image traced using Deluxe Paint. At 24 fps, and with unstable, freeze-framed TV images that were murder on the eyes, it was about as arduous a take on rotoscoping as you could imagine.

But the results were worth it. The animation was smooth and natural, and the technique brought the unexpected bonus of allowing several artists to work on the same character without any stylistic disparity. As a result, when Mercier was called up for national service, one year later, new artist Thierry Levastre was able to smoothly take up where he left off.

And there was another additional benefit. Although the resulting animation system exhibited some latency between movements, this had the effect of enforcing Cuisset's intention of creating a slower, deeper game – of transporting the story and the mechanics of an adventure into an action game. While not a great pen-and-paper RPG fan, Cuisset liked the richness of choice





Much of the strategy of *Flashback*'s combat involved correctly estimating the travel of a given roll, fall or jump before opening fire



PLAYING STRAIGHT

Based in two messy rooms laid out a little like a barn (the 'big meeting table' is shown above), Delphine was a friendly, creative studio, even if it did transform into a furnace in the summer. The team members were all passionate gamers, playing and working equally hard, and sometimes both at the same time. The real world was their playground just as much as game, and team members were always inventing new tricks for both environments. Patricia Cuisset, Paul's wife, was famous for her practical jokes, such as black ink on a telephone receiver or a dead fish hidden in a mouse.

they offered their players. Both he and the rest of Delphine were fans of *Dungeon Master*, and there was a strong desire to give real choice and freedom of action to the player.

The problem was that the team's ideas for new and interesting situations were taking the game further and further away from The Godfather's plot. Indeed, Cuisset had by this stage written a brand new story: Michael Corleone was replaced by Conrad B Hart, an agent for the Galaxian Bureau of Investigation who had uncovered an alien conspiracy, but wakes up at the start of the game on Titan, one of Saturn's moons, with his memory erased. Within the team, no one was much bothered by the shift in the project. But much more remarkably, outside the team, nobody else seemed to care either. Unthinkable in today's licensor-dominated and producer-managed games, de Senneville kept the faith with Cuisset's creative vision – and US Gold's response was to bear out his wisdom.

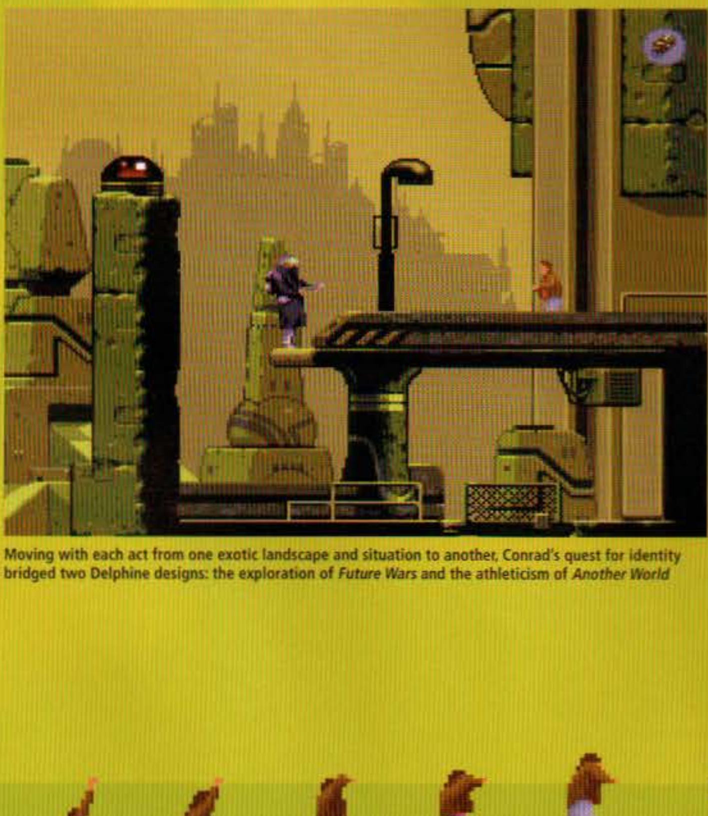
After eight months of hard work, the first level was playable and sent to the publisher. It was abundantly clear that the game the team had made had next to nothing to do with the licence it had originally signed up to produce. In theory, Cuisset was trying to keep his options open in case US Gold demanded a more faithful game: in practice he had so much belief in his own creation he was banking on that demand never being made: "It wouldn't have been that easy to go back to the original plan, and change the aliens into Mafia organisations… but I was pretty confident that what we had was pretty solid."

And when Brown played the prototype, Cuisset was immediately proved right. Seduced by the new approach, he encouraged the team to continue with it and even suggested a title for the game, *Flashback: The Quest For Identity* – a blessing for Cuisset, who still hates choosing names for his creations. With 15 years of hindsight to draw on, the team members still can't believe that they treated a heavyweight licence like The Godfather with such flightiness.

Toward the end of 1991, *Flashback* moved into production and its art team gained two more members, Fabrice Visserot and Patrick Daher, who were needed to create additional animations for the game's enemies. Chastel recalls a total of 1,500 frames, 800 of them for Conrad alone, and Cuisset speaks wearily of "crates of transparencies". The artists' eyes were tiring quicker and quicker, worn out from those flickering TV images, but they were happy: a visit from Jordan Mechner, who went into ecstasies about the quality of their work, galvanised them into seeing the project through.

The artists' eyes were tiring more and more quickly, worn out from the flickering of those TV images, but they were happy

Meanwhile, Cuisset went on designing. He coloured little squares, drew little symbols: an enemy, a trap, a door, a key, before scripting the levels. But just at the time when he was expecting to be able to turn his



Moving with each act from one exotic landscape and situation to another, Conrad's quest for identity bridged two Delphine designs: the exploration of *Future Wars* and the athleticism of *Another World*

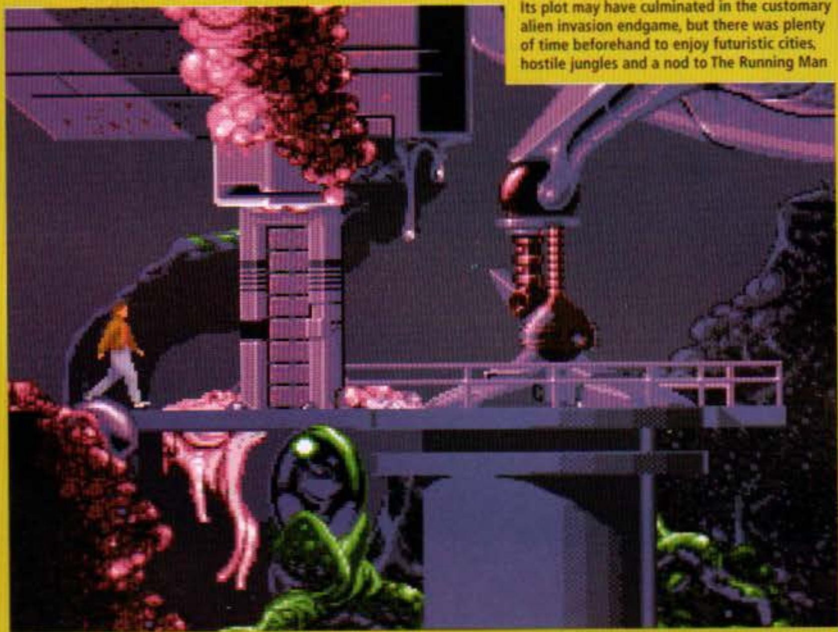




attentions from programming to game design and balancing, there was another blow: programmer Frédéric Savoir, who had been working on the Mega Drive version of the game, left Delphine with Eric Chahi to found Amazing Studios, leaving Cuisset facing the major headaches which still plagued the project.

One of the major problems he had to solve was memory – or lack of it. How could he load the 800 animation frames for Conrad in the little 64Kb of the Mega Drive's VRAM? He came up with a buffer, where the sprite blocks of the animations, enemies and other interactive elements of the sets were decompressed in realtime. But with all the RAM being used up by the buffer, he had no way of saving the game. In the end, he found an unorthodox solution, squeezing the saves into an unused 1.5Kb he found on the sound chip. Cartridge size also presented a problem. The usual 16Mb cart simply wasn't enough to contain the whole game, and so the hope was that it could be released on a 32Mb cart instead. Unfortunately, the price that Sega was asking for the bigger cart was more than US Gold was willing to pay, and in the end the publisher took the decision to compromise, and invest only in a 24Mb cart. It meant that the Mega Drive side of the project ended in heartbreak, as entire levels of the game had to be junked to fit the revised cart size.

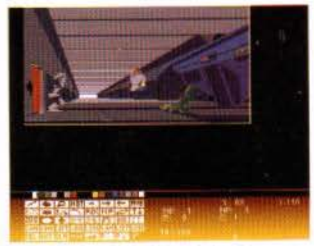
Indeed, for a game started with such optimism and confidence, *Flashback* finished on a low. Released in time for Christmas 1992, it met with immediate success. But when Cuisset heard the initial sales figures – of around 800,000 copies – he was despondent rather than elated. Having been converted to the Mega Drive on the promise of millions of sales, he found it impossible not to see the game as a failure. It was only years later, when someone handed him a copy of the Guinness Book Of Records, that his perceptions changed: there, in black and white, it listed *Flashback* as the best-selling French game of all time.



Its plot may have culminated in the customary alien invasion endgame, but there was plenty of time beforehand to enjoy futuristic cities, hostile jungles and a nod to The Running Man



Much like spiritual predecessor *Another World*, *Flashback* made the transition to every format that would support its technology, SNES, 3DO and PC included. Though frame rates varied during cutscenes, the play experience survived



THUMBSCREWER

Developed by Benoît Aaron in order to create the cut-scenes for *Cruise For A Corpse* – and affectionately named 'the torture factory' by Cuisset – Dpoly was an interesting piece of technology. Vector based, it allowed for the creation of high quality images that took up very little space. Cuisset's nickname didn't reflect the quality of the results – the problem with it had to do with its clumsy interface, which frustrated and infuriated the artists who had to work with it.





The MARDF logo stands for Machine A Rotoscoper De Fabrice – a reference to the hand-decorated cardboard housing Fabrice Visserot had created to help shade the image on his TV



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Rocksteady Studios Ltd

DATE FOUNDED: December 2004

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 30

STUDIO HEADS: Sefton Hill, Jamie Walker

URL: www.rocksteadyltd.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Urban Chaos: Riot Response (PS2, Xbox)



Anti-terrorist firstperson shooter *Urban Chaos: Riot Response* is Rocksteady's debut title, available on the PS2 and Xbox



rocksteady



LOCATION:
North London

CURRENT PROJECTS:
An unannounced next-gen console title

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"We are an independent UK company based in spacious offices in Finchley, North London. Our mission is to make great quality, low-risk games and work closely with our clients to build a great working relationship. We are a company with a strong sense of professionalism combined with happy and healthy staff. We believe we are redefining traditional games development with new methods to ensure excellent quality games are delivered on time.

Our company is comprised of some of the UK's top games industry talent. Rocksteady was initially formed from the cream of two proven industry teams and this means we had an amazing range of complementary skills from the outset. We have a policy of only hiring the best staff in the industry and we invest a lot of money to ensure everyone is equipped with everything they need to make great games. This has helped to create an environment where everybody contributes and everyone takes a lot of pride in our games.

Our current engine technology is both powerful and proven, and for next-gen titles we are already using Unreal Engine 3. We have just finished *Urban Chaos: Riot Response*, an FPS on PS2 and Xbox with UK-based publisher Eidos. *Urban Chaos* was a fantastic experience for the company and is receiving great early reviews, a real achievement for a new IP in such a crowded genre. We are now focusing on next-generation consoles with an unannounced signed project.

We pride ourselves on making great games in a professional, friendly and healthy atmosphere. Rocksteady is currently expanding so if you believe you are among the best in the industry and want to work on great games in a great working environment then Rocksteady is the place for you."



Urban Chaos: Riot Response is an imaginative FPS with punchy combat and a smart storyline

Plugging better brains into games

Game artificial intelligence is one of the least successful middleware markets, but there are plenty of smart companies trying to overcome the status quo


Pierre Pontevia, CEO, Kynogon


Paul Kruszewski, CTO, Engenuity

When it comes to technologies such as physics, graphics and networking, many developers use thirdparty middleware to make their games, but despite years of trying, artificial intelligence is still the Cinderella technology of the scene.

According to **Paul Kruszewski**, CTO of Canadian company Engenuity, the biggest challenge for the sector isn't technology but educating developers about what's possible.

"Just back from GDC, I'm surprised how many developers still don't know about AI middleware and what it can do," he says, and this is despite the fact that he's been going to the annual developers' conference for more than five years.

Pierre Pontevia, CEO of Kynogon agrees: "A lot of game developers still don't know AI middleware exists," he says. He also thinks the very term artificial intelligence is confusing. "Often people's understanding of AI is too academic," he explains.

And this is a theme stressed by most AI middleware companies which provide navigational and pathfinding technology not the sort of behavioural solutions which the term artificial intelligence tends to inspire. "I think high-level decision-making is specific to each game, and hence best addressed by in-house solutions," Pontevia says.

Yet he thinks the future for AI, especially the type of low-level solutions offered by Kynogon amongst others, remains bright. "To date, the industry has concentrated on rendering, but next-generation game challenges will come from providing immersive, believable environments, including dynamic, destructible environments and credible AI," he predicts. "If developers spend as much time, energy and money on AI as they have on rendering, we will be amazed at the results."

> **"Next-generation game challenges will come from providing believable environments and credible AI"**

PathEngine: PathEngine

As can be understood by its name, PathEngine is a pure pathfinding technology. "You can think of PathEngine as a relatively low-level set of mechanisms for representing and manipulating information about possibilities for agent movement," says CEO **Thomas Young** who, before relocating to France, was a coder at the Sheffield studio owned by Gremlin and then Infogrames.

Built as a modular system, it provides a set of building blocks that can be used to address a variety of different gameplay requirements.

"I think great games, and great AI, depend on getting high-level architecture and interactions between animation, collision and the pathfinding just right," explains Young. "But it's very difficult to provide a global solution to the problem of game AI. Instead, middleware must provide highly focused and modular components that can then interact with other parts of the game in different ways depending on what is most important to the game designers."

For that reason, PathEngine doesn't offer any behavioural features, although the company has a partnership with SpirOps to support integration between their AI products.

Company: PathEngine
Product: PathEngine v5.02
Clients: Dimps, Flying Lab Software, IMC Games, Ironlore Entertainment, NCsoft, Webzen
URL: www.pathengine.com


One game using PathEngine is Flying Lab Software's swashbuckling MMOG *Pirates Of The Burning Seas*. This shot shows how PathEngine can distinguish between the different heights of level components



Axel Buendia, CEO, SpirOps (left), with Jerome Hoibian, CTO



Kynogon: Kynapse

The original provider of the AI component for Criterion's RenderWare middleware, the next-gen release of Kynogon's technology has seen the French company making its own way in the world. Called Kynapse, it's a low-level component providing features such as decision-making and pathfinding.

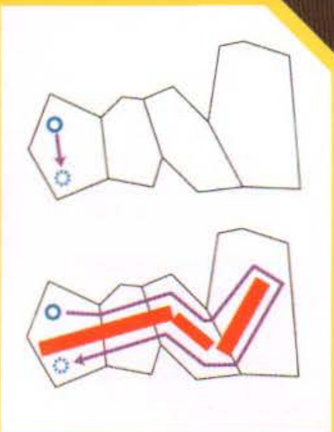
"Whatever the gameplay is, a game's decision engine needs to be fed with appropriate dynamic perception information about the 3D environment, such as where the hiding places are, or the access ways for an opposite flank assault," says Pontevia. "Once the decision is taken, it needs to be implemented so 3D pathfinding, as well as team coordination, becomes key."

Because of this, an important tool within Kynapse is the automatic pathdata generator. A preprocessed task, it chews through the game's levels and maps breaking down all the terrain information into a form AI agents can actually use.

Equivalent to creating a collision mesh for physics, as well as AI uses, developers can use the pathdata generator to build hierarchical data structures from their levels, which are also useful in terms of working out how to stream data from disk. "We have clients buying Kynapse specifically for this tool," reveals Pontevia.

More generally, this hierarchical approach to data works well in terms of mapping the way AI calculations are carried out to next-gen hardware architecture too, as large-scale simulations can be handled by streaming and parallel processors. For example, one of Kynapse's GDC demos shows over a thousand autonomous NPCs dynamically avoiding each other through a city environment.

Company: Kynogon
Product: Kynapse v4
Clients: Atari, Ascaron, EA, Lionhead, Pyro, Real Time Worlds
URL: www.kynogon.com



BabelFlux: BabelFlux

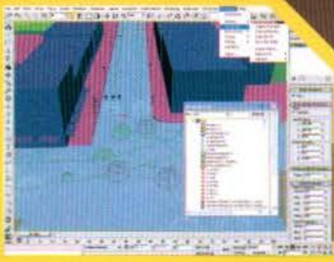
The newest company in the AI middleware space is US outfit BabelFlux. The brainchild of **David Miles**, who previously worked for Eidos studio Crystal Dynamics on games such as *Tomb Raider: Legend.*

"I think the biggest challenge for next-gen AI is reacting to constantly changing worlds," Miles says. "Game designs call for much more destructibility and physics-based gameplay, and it's difficult to enable enemies to fluidly navigate through these areas."

Currently only available as a pre-release technology to selected developers, the BabelFlux motion planning engine supports large numbers of characters of different sizes and shapes moving through complex worlds full of dynamic obstacles, thanks to its preprocessing geometry phase which automatically generates the navigational database.

"The motion-planning engine enables game characters to navigate levels automatically, freeing up developers to concentrate on the high-level AI behaviours," Miles says.

Company: BabelFlux
Product: BabelFlux
Clients: currently all clients are confidential
URL: www.babelflux.com



Engenuity: AI.implant

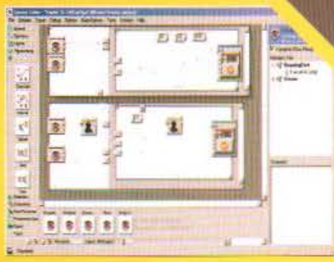
One of the longest-serving game AI middleware companies, Engenuity was originally formed as BioGraphic Technologies, before being bought by Canadian simulation specialist Engenuity in November 2005. Focused on the game, special effect and military simulation markets, its AI.implant product targets two areas: intelligent navigation and realtime crowd simulation.

"The problem of intelligent navigation is all about how does the AI know about the world and then, how does the AI reason in an efficient manner?" says Kruszewski. "We are solving the first problem by beefing up our navigation mesh authoring tools and the second problem by optimising our navigation algorithms for the new consoles."

He reckons the other big issue, the challenge of handling computer-controlled crowds, is a more philosophical one, however. The trick, he says, is working out how to author and manage crowds, as opposed to large numbers of individuals.

One important part of creating such entities is AI.implant's visual development environment (AI.DE), as it enables developers to preview their work directly in their level editor. Plug-ins to 3ds Max and Maya also provide the ability to control the size and configuration of crowds using standard paint tools.

Company: Engenuity
Product: AI.implant v4
Clients: Kuju, Midway, Sony America plus other confidential partners
URL: www.ai-implant.com



SpirOps: SpirOps AI

French company SpirOps brings a visual approach to AI creation. And, unlike most of the other middleware providers, its focus isn't pathfinding, but more behavioural aspects. "AI isn't about 'see you, kill you' behaviours anymore," says CTO **Jerome Hoibian**. "The complexity of the decisional AI is increasing rapidly as game environments become richer and players expect more credible interactions."

SpirOps AI hopes to help developers overcome such problems through its incremental design method, which can be used by non-programmers, such as designers. "The focus of the next version of the technology [due in September] is to create and assemble libraries of drives, or behaviours, like assembling pieces of a puzzle instead of designing a single brain each time," explains CEO **Axel Buendia**.

Other features on the company's to-do list include AI-driven procedural animation and smarter dialogue. "We are currently working with R&D labs and game developers to create a procedural animation solution, so basic animations can be managed by an AI and adapted according to the circumstances," says Hoibian.

Company: SpirOps
Product: SpirOps AI v2.7
Clients: Quantic Dreams, Ubisoft, plus other confidential partners
URL: www.spirops.com



BY JEFF MINTER

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

THE TROUBLE WITH REMAKES

I don't like remakes. Really don't like 'em. People may think it strange that I feel that way, since some of the games I'm most remembered for in latter years have been remakes, and now that people know I'm working on stuff for Xbox Live Arcade I often come across comments that go something like: "Oh, please do a remake of *Tempest 2000* for Live Arcade, that would be ace!"

And in truth I could do an absolutely wicked remake of *Tempest 2000* on the 360 hardware, and probably turn it round in a couple of months and have it looking and playing much more nicely than the original... but I really don't want to. I love *Tempest*, but I don't want to be beholden to it for the rest of my life (nor do I want to be beholden to whoever owns the rights to that old name every single time I sit down to write a shooter, thank you very much) – certainly the new game I'm working on will build on some ideas from that old work, but the things it'll build on will be the things that made *Tempest* '2000' rather than any more aping of Theurer's game. It will recognisably be 'what the creator of *Tempest 2000* did next', but it will be building on half a lifetime's experience of making shooters and funky graphics toys rather than resurrecting a 25-year-old design, much though I respect and revere the old thing.

It's not that all remakes are necessarily bad – I like to think that my *Tempest* updates prove to an extent that it can be done well; it's just that it seems so often these days remakes are done not out of any desire to lovingly update a cherished original so much as through a corporate need to rape the corpse of some poor old soldier from the dawn of days whose name ought to have been left alone to shine in dignified glory from its proper place in history. But if money and lawyers have granted you a back-catalogue of respected old names from the past, you do not honour them by creating ill-observed, shoddy clones of them and then sticking piss-poor 'street' hip-hop graphics on top; nor do you enhance your bland, cookie-cutter generic modern game at *all* by clumsily retrofitting some classic name onto it. Just *don't*. It just makes those of us who do fondly remember those old games want to stab you in the ear with a fork.

> I could do a wicked remake of Tempest 2000 on the 360, but I really don't want to. I don't want to be beholden to it for the rest of my life

By all means give us emulation – emulation is lovely, and I'll happily drop a few quid (or Microsoft Points or whatever the currency is) on a nice, faithful version of the original I can play on my plasma – even better if I have online high-scores now and can play against my mates over Xbox Live, too. I think what a lot of us have missed, and also what draws people to retrogaming, is not so much the old games themselves (enjoyable though playing emulations can be, in the end only the absolute best of them can stand up to the rose-tinted specs coming off in front of 50 inches of plasma) but the near-extinct format that they exemplify.

Sometimes you don't want to play a great, overarching epic; sometimes you just want a few minutes of old-school shootery goodness with accompanying high-score tauntery with your mates, and with stuff like Live Arcade and 'virtual consoles' appearing on the new systems it looks like this niche of gaming is about to open up again (and a good thing too). But please, don't do as some have done on handhelds and just knock out shoddy, tarted-up remakes.

So, give us proper emulation or, better still, give us *new* old arcade games.

That may sound like a contradiction, but it can be done – I would cite *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved* as a shining example of just how good it can be. The '*Retro Evolved*' tag is an apposite description of it – the game clearly draws its influences from the likes of *Asteroids* and *Robotron*, but without any micturition on the memories of those great classics. *Retro Evolved* is a thoughtful and competent answer to the question "what would it be like to make that old style of game with modern hardware?" and it's certainly the Live Arcade title in my library which gets the most loving.

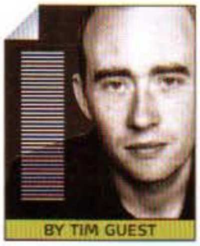
It's good that this area of gaming is opening up once again and enabling smaller developers to create new, old-style games that are fun in the way that games used to be fun. I think it's something that we've all been missing, and it's something I'm looking forward to participating in enthusiastically myself. And by all means, yes, let's draw on our heritage and be inspired by the designs that defined the early days of gaming, but let's not go down the Hollywood route of new, shiny remakes that always end up being disappointing when they're compared to the original films.

It's time for retro to evolve. Don't make me get my fork out.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser



Illustration: tstokes



BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

DON'T GET CROSS, GET EVEN

Cynewulf, a 27-year-old electrical engineer from Flint, Michigan, is perhaps the only person alive (with the exception, perhaps, of a few nutty Filipinos) who knows how it feels to be crucified.

His crime was virtual murder. Cynewulf, a barbarian and known killer, resident and beta-tester of the brand-new virtual world *Roma Victor*, had stalked defenceless young Romans, fresh to the world, until the rulers of the virtual empire decided enough was enough. As an example to others, he was put to the cross. Recent research has suggested Jesus might in fact have been nailed by his genitals; Cynewulf was spared this particular humiliation, but it still wasn't all fun. As the virtual crucifix was raised, a fellow barbarian ran from the crowd and attacked the guards in a rage. Cynewulf watched helplessly as his compatriot was put to death. Otherwise, his was a fairly cheery execution. It was *Roma Victor*'s first, and a few bugs had yet to be ironed out. The sinning barbarian should have been firmly nailed to the cross, unable to speak or move, but, as the crowd watched the cross being raised, Cynewulf raised an arm and waved.

> The sinning barbarian should have been firmly nailed to the cross, unable to speak or move, but Cynewulf raised an arm and waved

The central problem of the self is the other. (As Sartre wrote: 'In football, everything is complicated by the presence of the opposite team.') We can triumph in our selves, kill god and claim his seat, but how do we conquer the other, who also believes they are supreme? How do we punish those who trespass against us?

The Christian solution to the problem of the other is forgiveness. You turn the other cheek, and everyone lives as brothers (with a few bruised cheeks). But even in the Christian faith, there's a problem: what to do about the one person you can't forgive? You can forgive those who trespass against you. You can forgive the Romans, who destroyed the son of God. But what about the disciple who betrayed him and put him on the cross? Who can forgive Judas?

To great fanfare this month, National Geographic has published a document recently rediscovered after 16 papyrus-destroying years in a safe-deposit box. It's the Judas gospel: Jesus' life, as portrayed by the man who grassed him up. The gospel, written 100 years after Christ's death, reverses Christian orthodoxy by making Judas Jesus' special disciple. In the Judas gospel, the betrayer becomes the beloved, and the villain becomes the hero. According to the document, Jesus told Judas he was the one who would be hated the most, but also the one who would stand closest to God.

Oddly, this is exactly the belief of the woman who betrayed my mother's god. (Perhaps it's the standard line of the betrayer, the single snake-tongued get-out clause.) Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the Rolls-Royce-toting free-love guru my mother fell in love with when I was two, was ultimately betrayed by his secretary, Sheela. Under the umbrella of his doctrine of love, she and her orange-clad cohorts plotted murder, bought illegal guns, stockpiled the AIDS virus and poisoned 800 people. When her crimes came to light, Bhagwan's thousands of disciples blamed Sheela, not the guru, for every crime committed under his regime. She plea-bargained with the US Attorney General, gave testimony for a reduced sentence and, after just two years in jail, fled to Switzerland (where she now runs an old people's home, which I joke I'll send my mum to when she grows old). Two years ago Stern, a German magazine, tracked Sheela down. She stated that, in fact, she was Bhagwan's special, select disciple. He chose her to betray him as her ultimate test of faith.

The point here is that perhaps even the betrayer has a place in the world. However alien, the estranged other always has a point of view. Now, through virtual worlds, we have invented a new medium to try to understand each other. In these not-quite-imaginary places, we can exchange objects and experiences impossible in the real world. We can crucify each other, and live to tell the tale.

"I was raised in a fairly religious upbringing, but I don't view this game or this method of punishment as an insult against Christians," Cynewulf told me. "In fact, the era being represented is rife with possibilities for Christian gamers to roleplay being among the early faithful who died for the faith. A Christian player could decide to be another Perpetua and face lions rather than renounce her faith, or another player could roleplay an early church father and re-enact with other Christians the debates that formed the various sects of Christianity – this could actually be a great opportunity for religious players wanting to relive that rather momentous time in their history. My chosen preference, however, is just to step away from the modern world and pretend to be a Woden-worshipping Germanic warrior. It's just a game, after all.

"It was surprisingly agonising for just being a game," he continued. "Being jeered at by the Romans while immobilised is not much fun. Particularly since they are all weaklings who deserve to die by my sword."

Tim Guest is working on a book about virtual worlds. Contact him if you have a virtual tale to tell at tim@timguest.net





BY MR BIFFO

DEAR GOD

This isn't meant to be a letter to, y'know, 'God' and that (that would be madness). The 'dear god' was merely an exclamation. Or, rather, an edited version of an exclamation I uttered aloud not two minutes before setting pen to paper. What I actually said was: 'Dear god – you have got to be ruddy kidding' (not to be confused with Rudyard Kipling).

I said this upon completing the game *FEAR*. Yes, I know it's been out a while. I bought it on the day of release, being – as I was at that point – starved of my beloved firstperson shooters. Unfortunately, both the PCs I owned were incapable of running it. One apparently wasn't powerful enough, and the other didn't have the right sound drivers. When I tried to update them it buggered up the sound card.

So, anyway. I've just bought a new PC, which runs it fine. Alas, it wasn't worth the wait. Indeed, it was one of the biggest prick-teasers I've ever played. Throughout, you're drip-fed portentous dialogue and doom-laden set-pieces, waiting the whole time for hell to be unleashed. Only in the game's closing moments – where (look away now, spoilerphobes) you briefly witness a nuclear explosion – does the game genuinely impress. And in that moment of being impressed you think: "Wahey! Here we go! All that tedious, sixth-form, sub-ghost train nonsense is finally going to pay off!"

Except it doesn't. You get your explosion, and then you get some dreadful epilogue in a helicopter: "How did you survive the explosion?!" – and then a thump on the helicopter roof – "What was that?" – and then the end credits. Like, hello? I mean, what?

I'm too enraged to discuss it further. Instead I shall discuss my current bete noir, EA's *The Godfather: The Game*. If ever there's been a game which highlighted the gulf of sophistication between videogame and cinema, this is it. Where to start? In terms of being a hilariously misguided licence, it's up there with the Game Boy version of Kramer Vs Kramer.

Who thought they could make a game out of The Godfather? Why even try? Do these people force their sons to wear dresses and press flowers? The Godfather and videogames are wholly incompatible. It's like trying to make a vulture live in a dog basket. To even think about attempting it underscores the naïvety that still exists within the games industry. To actually attempt it is nothing short of egomania.

Even bad films are about something. Let's take the example of Aliens; it's a classic sci-fi film, and has probably influenced more games than any other. But what's it about on a thematic level? Is it about space marines shooting monsters? No. It's about motherhood.

> "Wahey! Here we go! All that tedious, sixth-form, sub-ghost train nonsense is finally going to pay off!"

At its heart you've got two mothers looking to protect her offspring: Ripley, protecting her surrogate daughter, Newt, and the Alien Queen, protecting her saliva-dripping spawn. Mercifully, as far as the various game interpretations of the Alien franchise go, it's also a kick-ass action film. But show me a single game which approaches it for thematic depth.

The Godfather was about family, and power, and the interaction of its characters. To try and turn it into a *GTA* clone is beyond madness. It's like turning Cold Mountain into a football management sim.

The Godfather: The Game isn't an awful videogame. But it's an awful, painful, interpretation of its source material. It doesn't understand the complexity. Playing it is like watching a bunch of primary school kids performing The Passion Of The Christ. It's embarrassing and makes videogames look stupid. Why? Because – once again – it's a videogame that thinks it's a film. Or, rather, it's a videogame that thinks it has the emotional, thematic and narrative complexity of a film, when in reality it's the same old guff with the same poorly-acted, weakly-scripted cutscenes.

Speaking as someone who has dabbled in writing scripts for videogames, I say this: stop now. That's enough. Games don't need a story. They don't need a theme. They don't need a narrative. They're just games, and that's enough.

If it's a shoot 'em up, give us new and interesting ways to shoot things. We don't need semi-interactive cutscenes featuring stupid, scary girls, and vague plots that are never explained. We don't want heroes who break off from the action to bemoan their amnesia, or flirt with their co-workers. If it's a platformer, I don't want the comedy monkey character's backstory. I want him to jump and collect stuff.

Game designers: focus your efforts on what you do best. Give us new worlds to explore, and new things to do, and let us come up with the stories in our heads. We can fill in the thematic and dramatic gaps if we want to, but if you're doing your jobs we won't care about any of that. We'll be involved and immersed, because we should feel like we're there, in the game.

You can spend all you want on licences to pretend you're Martin Scorcese, but unless what you're creating is honest and true the end result is going to be as hollow as, I dunno, paying someone to pretend they love you: it isn't real.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television

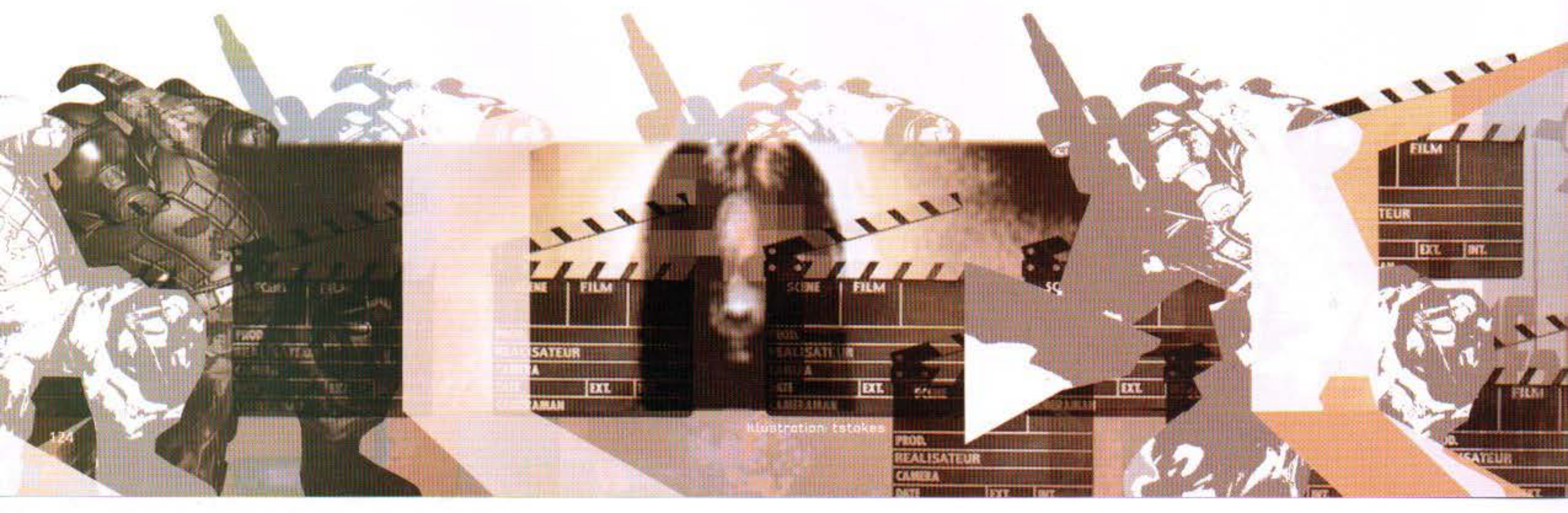
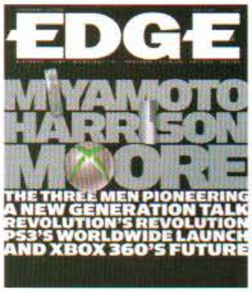


Illustration: tstokes

inbox



Issue 162

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: 1,000,000 red roses...

I'm just wondering if anyone has actually completed this callange on *We Love Katamari*? My lady's just started it and I'm quite concerned it may take more than a few hours. Anyone know how long roughly?
clew dup

I actually did this. It took a lot of hard work but it was well worth it. It's a challenge for sure, but it was a nice surprise when, upon collecting the quota, Aeris is resurrected and Lara strips off. If you are a lady or a homosexual male, Barry Burton does the same. That Takahashi is one clever guy.
Growl

Pop into Game, next time you're about, and stare at the racks of games. Your eyes will probably wander to your favourites, or fixate on some gem you've neglected. Fight it! Stand back and look at the whole section. Doesn't it make your eyes burn?

When did videogame artwork get so utterly lame? I'm not talking about the in-game artwork that has been covered in **Edge** so many times before. I'm talking about the frontline, customer-enticing official artwork and boxart sprinkled over magazines and retailers' shelves. For all that we have learned about marketing, for all of the software that allows us to produce works of art on a computer monitor, we have regressed back to what I had hoped was a long-forgotten age. An age when nearly every game on the shelf looked like a random member of the game's production staff was asked to scrawl something on a sheet of A4 and hand it to the talentless art department to be airbrushed to death.

For all that we have learned about marketing, for all of the software that allows us to produce art, we have regressed back to a long-forgotten age

The pages of **Edge** 162 were peppered with promotional artwork for *Super Monkey Ball Adventure*, but how did these amateurish sketches get through the art and marketing departments of Traveller's Tales and the might of Sega? They're not so-bad-they're-good, like some kind of stylish scrawl or cute doodle – they're just bad (and extremely wooden) attempts to redraw the 3D characters in 2D.

An extreme example (in my book) is *Bubble Bobble Revolution*. Despite the advice of **Edge**, I would like to give this game a shot, but I really don't think I could bring myself to buy something that looks that cheap. Not having the budget seems like a dismal answer – I've seen better doodles drawn on back-packs in Tipp-Ex. Draft in some art students, draft in an out-of-work cartoonist, trawl DeviantArt and pick a hobbyist doodler. Give us a free game, and we'll probably do it just to have something to put on our CV!

What is the point of producing boxart that not only fails to entice, but actually has the power to repel a potential customer? Save a bit of cash? Nice job, I'll save a bit of mine as well.
Mark Kelly

Poor cover art is a bad enough crime, but the most neglected area of packaging design is the one that you see the most of once you get the game home and on to its shelf – the spine. Can we really not do better than the bland, uneven plainness of European DS box spines? Perhaps Nintendo could give Mark Kelly a call – we'd be happy to pass on his details.

I've had about eight letters printed in **Edge**, but for some reason you won't acknowledge my repeated attempts to get you to run a feature on the eSports phenomenon which you seem to have ignored completely. Strange considering your mission statement used to be 'the future of electronic entertainment' and is now 'videogame culture'. It infuriates me every time I see some feature on some ridiculously leftfield or quirky aspect of videogame culture like underground PlayStation DJs yet for some reason you completely ignore the rise of a new type of game so finely tuned they're arguably beyond mere games (just like certain real-life games move beyond mere games and are worthy of more serious consideration like chess, football, snooker... Note how requiring physical athleticism is not necessarily a prerequisite to an activity being a sport).

In that paragraph alone I must've raised enough controversial points worthy of debate and investigation, yet it's ironic that the whole stigma associated with considering 'mere videogames' as sports is what's stopping people from seriously discussing this. The gamers who once struggled to gain acceptance for their misunderstood medium are now the same people laughing off the idea of videogames as a sport.
Tevong.co.uk

ESports, as you rightly point out, has always been part of **Edge**'s remit, as shown in our feature on the subject in **E**153 and our report on the World Cyber Games in **E**158. This month, we turn our attention to the growing influence of console-based eSports, tackling exactly some of the issues you raise – have a read on p20.

This is the first time I have written to your engaging magazine, but I am forced to ask you to clear up a certain omission. In your recent issues you have 'testscreened' many a DS game, from Japanese favourite *Bleach DS*, surgery game *Trauma Center* and massmarket favourite *Nintendogs*. However! (Yes, I'm getting to my point!) You have left *Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney* in the shade. You looked at it briefly in **E**151, but after that... silence. Please, don't let this superb game go missing off your

pages. I just want it to get the review it deserves, even if you only give it one of those half a page reviews. Thanks.
Simon Reed

We reviewed *Pheonix Wright* in **E**157, where it scored seven out of ten. A complete archive of **Edge** scores is available from the main page of www.edge-online.com

Having just bought a 360, I was in my local games retailer the other day, looking to buy a new game. Next to me, also looking at the 360 games, were a couple of teenage lads. One had a copy of *FIFA '06* in his hand, and the other was looking through a 360 magazine. "Oh my God, they're bringing out a table tennis game, that'll be crap!" said the lad, laughing. They then proceeded to the till, laughing away, to purchase their mundane update of a tired franchise.

No doubt, these are the same kids that live on a 24/7 diet of burgers and pizzas, and chocolate and crisps. At an age when their imaginations and willingness to embrace new ideas should, in theory, be at its peak, they were totally unable to comprehend the idea of something just a little different. I've been a gamer for some 25 years now, starting with the VIC-20. I can honestly say that, right through into my teens and beyond, I have always been fascinated by new videogaming concepts and ideas, always relishing something just a little different from the norm.

So, are developers to be blamed for knocking out countless mediocre updates of certain games? As much as it pains me to say it, I don't think they can be. Let's face it, if you or I were running a games company, you're going to develop games that you know damn well will sell. It's a business, like any other, the aim being to make money. Maybe the blame lies with the schools in some way, for failing to develop the imaginations and creativity of our youngsters? Regardless, I know this much: if our society is producing these almost robot-like people, content with living on a diet of mediocrity, it doesn't bode well for the future of videogaming, or any other creative industry for that matter.
Tony Geddes

If our society is producing these almost robot-like people, content on living on a diet of mediocrity, it doesn't bode well for the future of videogaming

Finally, someone gets the argument the right way round. It's not videogames ruining our children's education, it's our children's schools ruining their gaming acumen.



Julie Lloyd wonders why, as gaming hardware gets more powerful, its stars get more ugly. In *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* the faces range from boringly bland symmetry to 'lab-reject misshapes'

Topic: World's Best Button

So it's about time we paid homage to our favourite buttons of all time.
Atari VCS Paddle controller: that fire button was great – it had just the right amount of give and a satisfying feel when the contacts touched.
GameCube right shoulder button: the first analogue button that has enough depth to feel a difference between light and heavy and then to top it all off a wonderful little clunk when you reached the end of it.
cockbeard

The Start button to pause the game is my fave. Perfect for when you have to scratch your nose. Genius.
Player 1

I'm not sure about the best button ever, but the worst button ever may have been the Pause button on the Master System which was on the console itself.
Yossarian

Whichever button skips the cutscenes is my favourite.
mgdot

I'm amazed no one has thought of the plucky left mouse button. Perfect for shooting aliens, ordering massed ranks of Romans to certain death, buying overrated peroxide blonde football players, and searching for more adult entertainment on the interweb (I'm referring to the **Edge** forum obviously).
suhawk



Mark Kelly laments the state of box art, pointing a finger at examples such as this

Beloved magazine, this sham has gone on far too long. The Xbox 360 and PS3 are a complete and utter joke. All the games are simply the same trash wrapped up in shiny new clingfilm and sold as something new. The games industry has become a laughing stock if its biggest companies, for one second, think they can pull the wool over everyone's eyes and sell them *Need For Speed 6* with new tyres and hubcaps. Come on, do you know anyone who really, genuinely gives a fuck if the eight-core Cell processor of the PS3 can potentially build megaton bridges or something if all it's used for is another (awful) version of *GTA*? This is a country where the iPod sells by the truckload yet it's an MP3 player of poor build quality, weak sound and is over-priced and over-hyped. It's a hard drive. Wow. Get over it. Yet people buy it, simply because it's 'hip'. So how does dual 1080p output, eight cores, 120 frames per second and, in the Xbox's case, 10Mb of EDRAM figure in that? What kind of people do you think bought the PS2? Scientists? Astronauts? Seriously, I like your magazine, I like games (when they're not incredibly boring and predictable, eg: *Perfect Dark Zero*) and I am fascinated by industry figures, sales numbers, etc. But I'm not going to be conned into buying some pile-of-trash machine that simply renders images a few million times faster, because I don't like feeling as if I'm being taken for a mug.

Look at it this way, the DS has beaten the PSP, unless of course there's a complete and sudden turnaround (unlikely in sales figures), the PS3 is ugly, pointless and over-expensive. So

Continued

it has a new shiny case and stupid Bluetooth. For what exactly? I just think Sony et al have got the wrong idea about this. They won with the PS2 and then they completely and drastically change their stance in light of weak competition that they themselves are making stronger day by day. The PSP practically handed the DS the gauntlet (not that the DS didn't deserve it) by being £180 and sold with samey, useless games. The End.
Matthew Cassar

Just because powerful new machines enable worn-out 'bigger, faster, brasher' sequels doesn't mean that's all they can do. Those same machines are in the hands of the teams which have brought us the most innovative and dazzling games of this and previous generations. They see revolutionary possibilities where others see only higher polygon counts, and that's something to be excited about.

Topic: I feel really really bad about killing these things

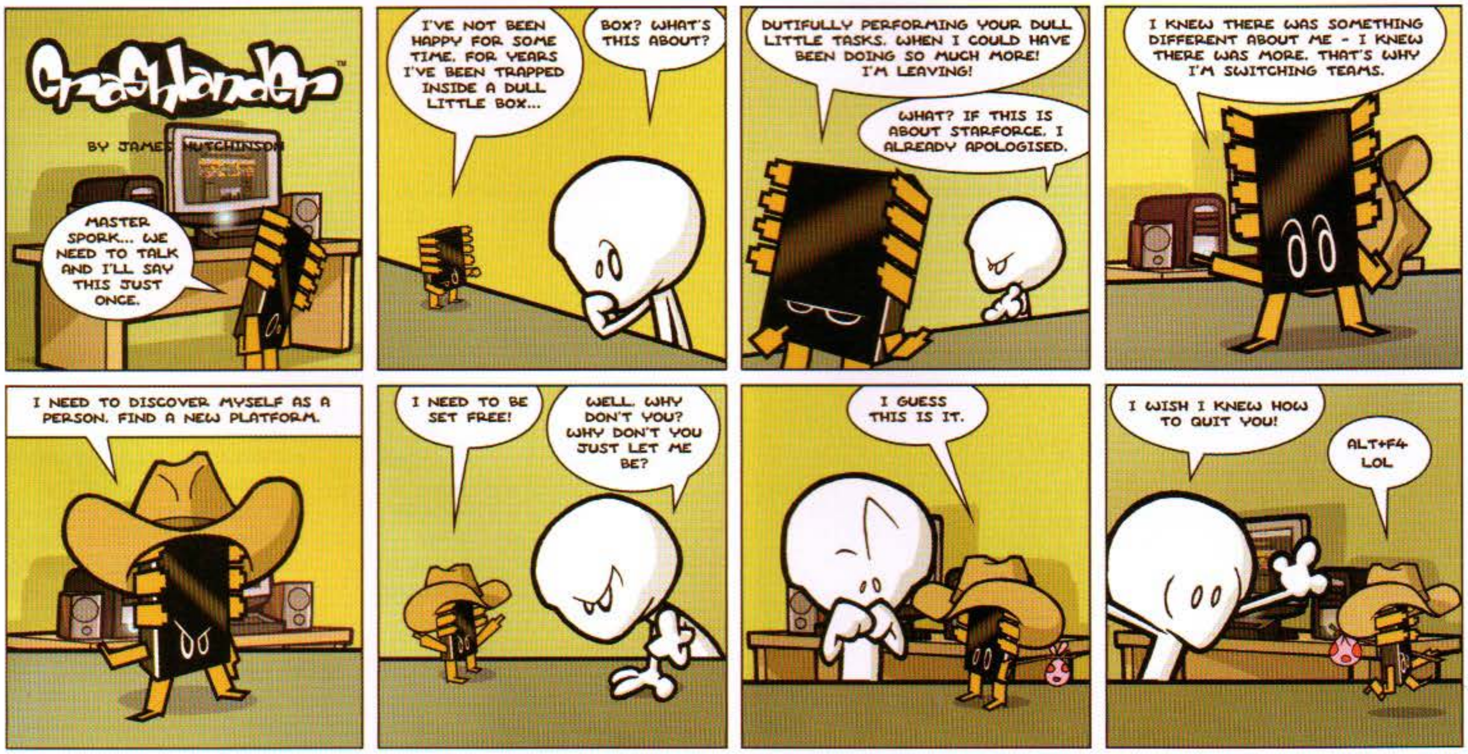
Shadow of the Colossus. This big, beautiful, seemingly happy wandering beast, and I have to kill it. Yes, I just downed my first Colossi. It was great fun, but never have I felt so bad about killing anything in a videogame. The only reason I have to do so so far is to save some moderately attractive lady and because the 'god' told me to.
Djorn

I felt sorry for all of them except that one that you have to wave the fire stick at. He really had it coming.
ecureuil

Why is everyone so ugly? Xbox 360 isn't solely to blame, but it has brought my point to the fore like no other console – most games with 'real' people in depict them as gonk-faced zombies, glassy-eyed shamblers or lab-reject misshapes that must seem comical to anyone playing a videogame for the first time. From *Oblivion*'s inbred gene pool to *Perfect Dark Zero*'s hideous clay creatures, I find that humanity is getting an increasingly rough deal in videogames these days, despite the increased graphical power on offer. I'd like to blame the uncanny valley principle, but it's far more depressing than that – too few developers seem to have an appreciation of human aesthetics outside of a stick figure pasted with increasingly intense textures and eyes that move around a bit. Everyone's talking about increased emotion in terms of next-gen experiences when they roll out their latest Spitting Image puppet, but the only emotion I'm currently feeling right now could probably be best summed up by watching The Stepford Wives (old one, not rubbish new one). We just can't hack real people, pun intended, at least not yet. Maybe *Dead Rising* is going to be far more satirical than it ever intended to be...
Julie Lloyd

Spending an hour with *Top Spin 2*'s character creation tool gives you an insight into the scale of the challenge of face creation that can turn your stomach just as surely as the software can lift an eyebrow or swell a philtrum. Improvements may be slow in coming.

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